

NOVEL

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The cover features a detailed illustration of two characters. In the foreground, a man with dark, spiky hair and a determined expression is shown from the waist up. He is wearing a brown and silver armored tunic with a large, rounded shoulder guard on his right side. He holds a long, dark sword diagonally across his body, with his right hand gripping the hilt. Behind him, a young girl with long, dark blue hair and light blue eyes looks towards the viewer with a gentle smile. She is wearing a white dress with blue accents and a large blue bow in her hair. The background is a soft-focus view of a town with stone buildings and a clear sky.

THE Strange Adventure of A Broke MERCENARY

WRITTEN BY Mine • ILLUSTRATED BY peroshi

VISIT...

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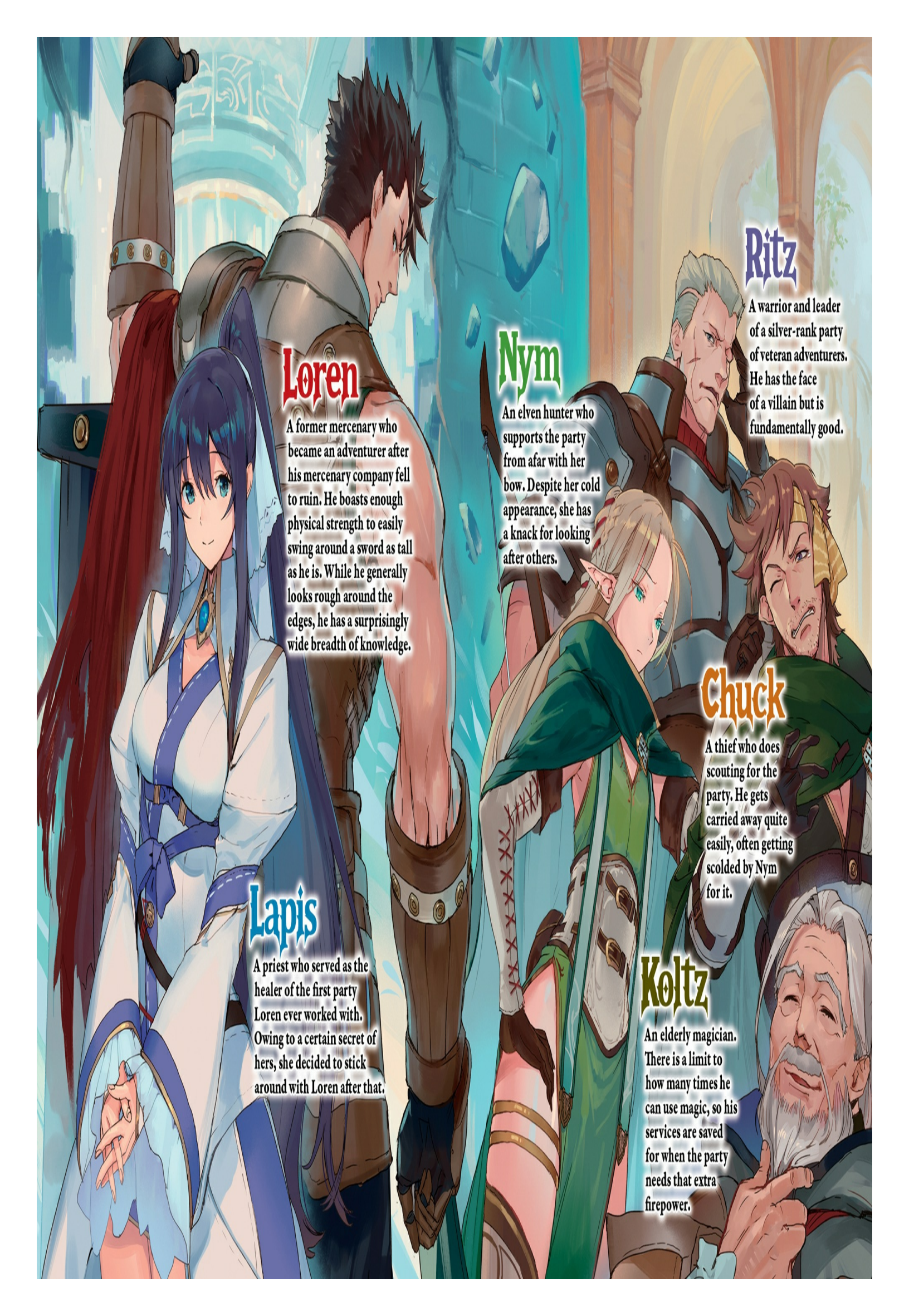
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Loren

A former mercenary who became an adventurer after his mercenary company fell to ruin. He boasts enough physical strength to easily swing around a sword as tall as he is. While he generally looks rough around the edges, he has a surprisingly wide breadth of knowledge.

Lapis

A priest who served as the healer of the first party Loren ever worked with. Owing to a certain secret of hers, she decided to stick around with Loren after that.

Nym

An elven hunter who supports the party from afar with her bow. Despite her cold appearance, she has a knack for looking after others.

Ritz

A warrior and leader of a silver-rank party of veteran adventurers. He has the face of a villain but is fundamentally good.

Chuck

A thief who does scouting for the party. He gets carried away quite easily, often getting scolded by Nym for it.

Koltz

An elderly magician. There is a limit to how many times he can use magic, so his services are saved for when the party needs that extra firepower.



“But I wonder,
why did you save
me of all people?
You abandoned
all the others.”

“It was a whim,” Loren replied,
somewhat annoyed. “Or you were
lucky. Or because I never returned
your copper. Pick whichever one
you want. The right answer’s
probably somewhere in there.”

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WRITTEN BY

MINE

ILLUSTRATED BY

PEROSHI



Seven Seas Entertainment

KUITSUME YOHEI NO GENSO KITAN Volume 1

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Illustrations by PEROSHI

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von Söldner in
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THE STRANGE ADVENTURE OF A BROKE MERCENARY

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Prologue:

Running to the End of the Rope

THE RUMOR WAS SPREADING—a whole village, wiped out.

So what? That's nothing new. Loren tipped back his glass. It was certainly a pity for whoever had lived there. But the moment Loren heard the village had been an outpost claiming new farmland, the only words to cross his mind were: *What else did they expect?*

These humans had built their home in inhospitable lands they'd had no right to enter. That made them little more than invaders to whoever—or whatever—had lived there before.

In a dispute between humans, the two sides could squabble all they wanted over land rights and whatnot. Unfortunately, the entities who ruled the outlands didn't generally respond well to discussion, and the moment they ran out of patience for intruders, all that awaited was the natural conclusion.

Not that they had to be left completely helpless. Loren turned a tipsy eye to the wall beside the desk of the adventurers' guild—the organization that owned and operated this bar. There, one could find a lopsided board crammed with papers: recruitment notices for the plethora of jobs the guild had the gall to call quests.

Sure, the word “adventurer” did have a nice ring to it, but these people essentially made a living doing the dirty work no one else wanted. This guild was the mutual aid group that catered to them.

“There's even more of them than last time.”

The board was so jam-packed that not a single gap remained for new posts. Yet people continued plastering new requests over the old, and now the whole thing was multiple layers thick.

Loren could hear the adventurers standing in front of it from all the way across the room. They had fallen into a heated debate over which quests were

worth it and which were right out.

“So that village south of Vesta bit the dust? Guess they built it pretty close to the Forest of Chaos.”

“No way, it wasn’t that deep in. Still hate to think the monsters on the outskirts of that forest could wreck a whole village.”

“Coulda been a herd of smaller ones. Can’t expect a farmer to handle something like that.”

However, the problem presently plaguing Loren had absolutely nothing to do with these adventurers’ noisy banter, or the annihilation of some outpost in who-knew-where. In fact, these were the least of his concerns.

“I’m broke.”

Loren hadn’t begun life as an adventurer. He had belonged to a mercenary company with which he made a living fighting in wars for pay. He’d been with them for as long as he could remember, and that had been a stable source of income until quite recently. Now, as for why such a man was sitting in a corner of a guild bar, a cup of ale his only company, it just so happened that, on their last outing, his mercenary company had been obliterated.

Loren had experienced innumerable battles over his career, on both the winning and losing side. Each time, his mercenary company had cut their way through all obstacles and survived somehow or another. Evidently, the time had come to pay the piper. The war they had been so certain they were winning suddenly turned sour, and Loren’s comrades were taken out one after another. During that terrible final battle, Loren told himself over and over again that it was the end of the line—yet, somehow, he had survived, if by a narrow margin.

Of course, that being the case, his pockets felt especially light right now.

The words “mercenary” and “savings” did not generally belong in the same sentence, and Loren was no exception to this rule. He almost always spent his money the second it came to him, and while that would have been bad enough, he’d also had to abandon everything he owned on the battlefield along with his comrades’ corpses.

All he had left to his name was his leather armor, a two-handed greatsword,

and a small sack of coins he'd stuffed into his pocket. A depressing sum, considering it amounted to the culmination of his life's work.

Loren knew he was far better off than someone completely penniless, but he too would wind up on the streets if he didn't find a source of income soon. His head hurt as he pinched the metal tag dangling from his neck.

This identification tag was proof of his registration with the adventurers' guild. The tag's material revealed the rank of its adventurer, and since he had just paid pocket change to register, Loren's tag was a cheap copper alloy—the lowest the guild had to offer. It would be swapped out for rarer, more expensive metals the higher he climbed. Not that Loren had any interest in rank. All that mattered was that this tag let him take jobs, and those jobs would get him some quick cash.

Here, he ran into yet another problem.

"I've got no one to quest with."

His comrades had all either split or been split open.

Folks outside the business saw mercenaries as a detestable bunch who paid for their meals in stolen lives. Needless to say, this often left mercenaries friendless outside of their own company. Yet again, Loren was no exception to the rule. And, as he had barely escaped the killing field that took everyone he knew, he had no one left to rely on.

He had his reasons for choosing the adventuring life now. Sure, society thought adventurers barely better than mercenaries, and like mercenaries, they often had to wander around searching for unsteady work. However, guilds didn't vet applicants prior to registration. While they did look into whether you had a criminal record, that check only extended to the country of registry. In short, the crude system missed any crimes the applicant might have committed on the other side of a given border. Consequently, even a rootless mercenary like Loren could easily register as an adventurer simply by paying the fee.

That said, no matter what quest he took, it would be tough going on his own. Whether he wanted to exterminate the beings called monsters that brought harm to humans, to harvest plants or gather ores, or to search for a lost something or someone—every one of these tasks was far too dangerous to

tackle without a party.

Loren had full confidence in his skills, to be clear. He just knew better. Being alone in the face of unexpected odds was a great way to die in a ditch, and quick.

“Huh, should I clean ditches or something?”

The prospect lacked appeal, to say the least. Loren had been more than a little surprised when he found out the adventurers’ guild accepted requests for ditch and drain cleaning—practically the furthest thing from an adventure he could imagine. Although people in this occupation famously did anything for the right price, so it kind of made sense.

But if that’s how it works, then drop the “adventurer” and just call yourselves the Odd Jobs Guild, Loren grumbled.

On the other hand, those sanitation jobs were low risk for decent pay, and they were gradually beginning to look more and more appealing. It would just be for a short while, just enough to get him on his feet.

Of course, Loren didn’t *want* to muck about in filth, but if you asked him to pick between mud and blood, he had experienced enough of the latter to immediately choose mud. As long as the job paid out, he’d plug his nose, close his eyes, and go for it. Even better, drains and ditches were features of civilization. In that line of work, he’d always be near people, which lowered the overall risk even further.

Now that I think about it, it’s not bad work at all.

With that, Loren convinced himself to make his way to the bulletin board to look for a job of that stripe—only to be caught off guard by a voice.

“Hey, tough guy. Are you looking for work?”

He glanced up to find a blond young man with shiny new armor and a one-handed sword at his waist. The young man stood across the table from Loren, and after taking a seat that Loren hadn’t offered, he leaned in and spoke again.

“You’re a swordsman, I see. A lone swordsman at that. Now, correct me if I’m wrong, but it looked to me like you were mulling over how you don’t have the

manpower to take on anything too big. But if you're up for it, how about tagging along with my party for a quest?"

I'd turn him down instantly if I were still with my company, Loren mused as he scanned the man in front of him.

Any mercenary who graciously accepted a job offered by a complete stranger couldn't expect a long future. Before accepting a job, it was essential to run a background check on the client, perform an analysis of the area, and conduct an investigation to ensure the absence of any dark rumors or shady dealings. This was common sense Loren had acquired in childhood.

Mercenaries understood they existed solely in order to temporarily bolster the causes of other people. As they maintained no affiliations, they could move freely, but in exchange, they usually had little to no backing from higher powers. Occasionally, that led employers to use them as disposable pawns, and as such, despite having rowdy dispositions, mercenaries were profoundly cautious when taking on new jobs.

There was one exception to this rule, however, and it was one that Loren fell smack-dab in the middle of: all rules went out the window when the mercenary in question was broke.

No matter what you set out to do, society barred you from doing it if you lacked sufficient funds, and this held true for mercenary companies as well. It took money to feed a crew, and it took money to renew and maintain equipment. It took money to move from battlefield to battlefield, and you needed reserves for times when jobs were thin on the ground.

Thus, when funds were low, a mercenary didn't have the leisure to pick and choose his work. Mercenaries who found themselves in this position often jumped at jobs without doing proper research, and soon, the unlucky ones no longer had to worry about money anymore.

"Our party has the manpower, but our front line is thin. You're an experienced swordsman by the looks of it. I'll make it worth your while, so how about you come with us? You won't regret it!"

Who could say what the man took Loren's silence to mean? Whatever the case, he continued soliciting with an impassioned zeal.

Loren, for his part, was considering his options. He could muck ditches without thinking too hard or having to fear for his life. In fact, the ditches were probably preferable to whatever job this guy was offering. But when all was said and done, Loren was still praying for an option that didn't end with him getting knee-deep in filth.

However, he didn't have enough information to determine whether this man meant to lead him to heaven or to hell. "What quest did you take?" Loren asked. *If he's trying to reorganize his party, that means he already has a job in mind.*

If the man said he hadn't decided, Loren intended to turn him down then and there.

And yet, it seemed the young man took the question as a favorable response. His face lit up proudly. "A simple extermination quest. My party has a thief, a priest, and a magician, but we might be going up against a lot of enemies, and I don't know if I can protect them all on my own."

"You'll have to be clearer than that. I still don't know if I'll be useful yet. I mean, have a look at this." Loren jingled his measly copper ID tag.

"Believe me, it's easy as pie. They're just asking us to take care of some goblins in the woods."

The young man continued to insist that it was no big deal, leaving Loren unable to do much save awkwardly nod along.

Chapter 1:

Recruitment to Resignation

IN THEORY, Loren knew what a goblin was: a frightfully repulsive humanoid monster that grew at most to the height of a human child, with a skin tone ranging from green to dark green. They thrived in a wide array of environments, from woods to marshes, and they multiplied at a terrifying rate. Cruel by nature and too unintelligent to realize it, the individuals were weak enough that they could be defeated even by a human who had never fought a single battle. As such, alone, they were regarded as little more than a nuisance. The problem came when they arrived in great numbers, which they too often did, given their incredible power of reproduction.

A goblin could breed with nearly any other species with reproductive organs, and their offspring took a mere few days to reach adulthood. While adventurers hunted armies of goblins every day, their overall population showed no sign of decreasing. Worse, goblins were said to surpass dragons in sheer tenacity.

But I guess I can understand why he thinks a few of them aren't a big deal, Loren thought as he dug his elbows into the table the man had led him to. He absentmindedly surveyed his would-be party members.

The blond young man had introduced himself as Saerfé. He was a warrior who hadn't been with the guild for long, but he spoke passionately about how once he was experienced enough, he would one day join the party of a hero. Loren was the same age as Saerfé but couldn't understand his enthusiasm in the slightest. He wanted to ask what drove Saerfé to such ambitions, but as the man went on and on—bringing up this or that lengthy legend and historic account, listing the names of famous swordsmen, and claiming he would eventually be among their ranks—Loren concluded the question would inspire such a lengthy monologue that it would cut into his sleeping hours. Therefore, he kept his curiosity to himself and let his mind wander during the rest of the seemingly endless sermon, which toed the fine line between aspiration and delusion.

At Saerfé's side sat a blushing girl in light gear with short, brown hair, whose eyes seemed to sparkle as she intently watched her leader ramble on. She had introduced herself as Narron, or something to that effect. She just so happened to be Saerfé's childhood friend; they had left their hometown together to become adventurers. With her light feet and nimble hands, Narron hoped to support Saerfé as a thief.

An adventurer "thief" was not necessarily a criminal, and as long as they registered with a guild, they wouldn't suddenly be arrested for identifying themselves as one. Not that the title constituted a legal defense should they dabble in actual thievery. In the field, a thief's role was to detect and disengage traps in ruins and mazes, as well as to open locked doors. As for why they insisted on sharing a title with criminals, Loren had zero clue.

I guess they just couldn't find a more appropriate name at the time, he concluded, then glanced at the next party member.

Beside the thief sat a girl who looked somewhat put off by the young man's rambling. She wore a dark-blue robe and a staff leaned beside her. Her expression seemed annoyed, but Loren's trained eyes didn't miss the fleeting glances she stole at Saerfé each time she stroked her long, flowing blonde hair or the soft sighs she let out each time he got worked up. It didn't take long to realize that, despite acting uninterested, she was listening attentively to his tale.

Her name was Oxy, and while she hadn't known Saerfé and Narron for long, she'd met them the day they registered at the adventurers' guild. She had remained in their party ever since. While she was apparently the same age as the other two, her staff was proof that she had already graduated from a magic academy.

"She can use magic three times in one day, you know," Saerfé bragged.

Loren couldn't tell whether that was amazing or not. His mercenary company hadn't hired magicians, who were more often employed by the government or the nobility. The rest generally lent their services as adventurers, like Oxy. As far as Loren knew, hardly any chose mercenary work.

Given Saerfé's clear pride in Oxy's skill, Loren had to assume she was some

sort of prodigy. He still questioned the usefulness of a power you could only use three times a day, but Saerfé's boasting implied he wouldn't take kindly to the question, and neither would Oxy. Again, Loren kept it to himself.

He always told himself: *If you want to live long, you gotta be able to read the room.* One thoughtless statement could very well drag him into an otherwise avoidable dispute, one with an undesirable resolution.

Finally, he glanced at the last party member, who sat next to Oxy—a girl in the largely white robes of a priest who kept her long black hair in a ponytail. Her name was Lapis, and she had pledged her faith to the god of knowledge. She maintained a somewhat troubled smile, directing an occasional apologetic glance at Loren. Having been recruited sometime after Saerfé reached town, she had known him for a longer time than Loren but a shorter time than Oxy.

Not long ago, Lapis had received her vestments as a full-fledged priest, and in order to build knowledge and experience, she had chosen the path of an adventurer instead of working within a church. From Loren's point of view, she was quite a peculiar woman.

By offering a prayer to her god, Lapis could partially manifest a kind of miracle called a blessing. However, she bashfully confessed she was rather incompetent at her craft and could only do so twice a day. Once again, Loren couldn't comprehend what there was to be embarrassed about. He could understand Lapis's two was lower than Oxy's three but didn't see how it made much of a difference.

Perhaps it went without saying at this point, but the mercenary company hadn't had any priests either. Priests who worked outside their church were already an oddity, and the ones who did never went out of their way to live off war and bloodshed.

Loren had never actually seen blessings at work, but he had heard they could heal wounds and neutralize poisons. Back when he was with the company, he'd thought it would be quite convenient to have a person who could do such things on hand. *And now I run into one right after the company's been annihilated. That's life for you.*

In any case, Loren had assumed Saerfé would eventually grow weary of

hearing himself talk, but the man showed no such indication. Realizing he was the only one present who would even attempt to put an end to this, Loren heaved a sigh of resignation and interrupted. “Could I ask about the job?”

Saerfé looked dissatisfied; Narron, openly resentful. The story must have been getting to the good part. Loren heaved his biggest sigh yet.

Sure, he was down on his luck, but he couldn’t shake the feeling he’d let himself be roped into a terrible party. First off, while he admittedly had no experience as an adventurer himself, he considered the other members even worse off in that department. The next point, which bothered him to no end, was how everyone apart from Saerfé was female. Role-wise, they were decently balanced, but the gender ratio was clearly biased toward women.

There were hardly any female mercenaries. This was partly due to the scarcity of women who wanted to be mercenaries, but it was also because of the various problems that tended to spring up when women were in the company—a grim reality that had proven itself time and again.

Regardless of any knee-jerk reaction such a statement elicited, Loren had heard of a number of companies that had split or even dissolved over troubles with women—and the men who fought over them—and he didn’t think those stories were completely baseless. With that in mind, he couldn’t help but see a party full of women as equally full of potential problems and, therefore, an ample reason for concern.

However, when all was said and done, Loren didn’t intend to stick around for long. *I’m only tagging along until I’ve solved my more urgent financial woes.*

“Sitting around talking won’t earn me anything, is all I’m saying,” Loren said to Saerfé. “You all might have the time and money to waste, but I’m dead broke. If you’re inviting me to work, then I’d like to talk about work. Is that a problem?”

“No, you’re right. Now that we understand each other to some degree, perhaps it’s time we move on to the main topic.”

“Hey, are we seriously taking this guy along?” Narron interrupted. She made no attempt to hide her distrust of Loren. “He’s a former mercenary, isn’t he? The sorta guy who’d do anything for a quick buck. Are you sure you want him in our party?”

Loren found that to be a terrible assumption but couldn't exactly object. Narron wasn't wholly wrong to question his integrity. Some mercenary companies really would take on any sort of nasty job as long as they were paid handsomely. However, Loren doubted those guys made up the majority. At the very least, his company hadn't been like that, and mercenaries did have a say in what jobs they took. Any who made a habit of picking up any and all dirty work would soon end up hounded by grudges. And you could never underestimate how far someone would go to satisfy a grudge.

A wise company took care to select work that wouldn't generate such problems, but the existence of wise companies necessitated the existence of not-so-wise ones as well. Frankly, these not-so-wise ones lowered the reputation of all mercenaries. After all, for some reason, a bad reputation was far easier to establish than a good one.

"Didn't you agree when I said we needed another vanguard?" Saerfé said.

"Sure, I did. But why's it gotta be him?"

"I don't really see a way around it," Oxy spoke up. "Inexperienced and unaccomplished as we are, I wouldn't expect a capable adventurer to join us. With that in mind, our best bet is to recruit someone like him, who might not be experienced as an adventurer but who knows his way around a battlefield."

"I get where you're coming from, but... Say, what do you think, Lapis?" Narron turned to the priest girl, desperate for backup.

Lapis glanced at Narron for an instant, then shifted her gaze to Loren and tilted her head. "I'm not so sure. He doesn't look like a bad person to me."

"Aw, man, this is why you sheltered priests are so hopeless. You're only saying that because you don't know what mercenaries are really like."

"True, I was raised by the church, and I wouldn't say I'm an expert on the nature of mercenaries, but I do see myself as a good judge of character."

Narron scoffed as though disinterested, even though she had been the one to ask.

"It's not like I'm begging you to keep me in the party," Loren said. He did find this whole back-and-forth kind of a pain, but a part of him dearly wished to save

himself the trouble of finding another party. Back in his mercenary days, he had worked with people he didn't like numerous times. It didn't sting too badly to just grin and bear it. "Just consider me temporary help for this one quest."

"Oh, there's no need for that, I could register you as an official member," Saerfé offered.

Loren refused to answer. The way he saw it, officially joining a group he didn't think himself likely to get along with had far more cons than pros. In fact, he could hardly think of anything he might gain from it. He decided then and there that he would search for another party once he could breathe more easily about his wallet.

"Our quest is a goblin hunt," Saerfé declared at last. "Goblins have appeared in the woods around a town about a three-day walk east of here, and they need someone to take care of it."

"You mean Ain Village, right? For a measly goblin hunt? Oh, come on, there's a job way more worth our while," Narron protested, leaving Saerfé scratching his head.

Oxy lent him a hand. "Are you talking about investigating those newly discovered ruins? There's no way we could take on a quest like that. The guild would only assign it to a more accomplished party, anyway."

"Keep saying that and we'll be stuck on the dirty and cheap jobs forever."

Saerfé shook his head. "We take these early jobs to build our skills. Once we're good enough, the guild will let us move on to bigger, greater things. You have to put up with it for now."

After Saerfé made the call, Narron had nothing else to say on the matter, though she was clearly still discontented.

What a disorganized party, thought Loren. But seeing as the quest was decided, he posed the next pertinent question. "How many goblins are we talking about?"

"We don't know. A hunter spotted them in the forest and ran back to report them. Still, no matter how many there are, they're just goblins. No big deal," Saerfé replied.

Loren did feel a touch of anxiety about this attitude, but they *were* only goblins. It wouldn't be too dangerous. He gave up pursuing the matter.

"If nothing goes wrong, I would like to depart tomorrow. How's that sound?" he proposed.

"Right, that should...probably work out?" said Saerfé.

"Then shall we all pack enough for a round trip?" said Loren. "We'll meet in front of the east gate tomorrow morning. Anyone have a problem with that?"

No one spoke out against the idea, so Loren's thoughts turned to the contents of his wallet. It was quite nearly empty, no doubt about that. But he was sure he had enough to buy six days of rations. The problem was that this would leave him completely penniless. However, they would mostly be camping during the trip, and perhaps they would come across an edible animal along the way.

It should work out if I skip a few meals to buy a blanket, thought Loren as he informed Saerfé he was good to go and brought the meeting to a close.

The next morning, Loren trudged to the east gate holding a sack of food supplies, his cloth-covered sword on his back, and his worn leather armor over his chest. He had come lightly equipped, but he didn't exactly have anything else, nor the money to replace what he'd lost.

It seemed he was a little too early. Saerfé's party hadn't arrived, and with nothing else to do, he struck up a conversation with the soldier guarding the gate.

Only now did Loren learn the name of the town he was staying in: Kaffa. Loren didn't know a single thing about Kaffa. It was definitely a town in some part of some country, but mercenary life had left Loren with little knowledge about geography or politics. Also, he had run from his company's demise as fast as he could, without caring where he ended up.

"It's a nice town, Kaffa. Sure, it loses out to the capital, but the food's good, the townsfolk are nice, and it's my homeland."

The young soldier told Loren he had been born and raised in Kaffa, though

Loren fundamentally didn't understand his attachment to it. He'd been in the mercenary business from before he knew his own name, and he'd lived like a migrating bird, each new battlefield becoming his new base of operations. As he had never settled down in one place for any extended period of time, he couldn't help but feel a little envious of this soldier who could say from the depths of his heart that Kaffa was a good town.

But in all his life, settling down would have meant no longer being a mercenary—and Loren wouldn't have known what he was, if not that. The prospect of being anything else had felt so far away, so beyond him. Now, he had been pushed into another life without his say-so, and he would question himself as long as he didn't join another company.

Should he stick it out as an adventurer? Or should he give it all up and lay his roots down in this town the soldier loved so much?

Just then, Saerfé's party finally showed up. They were all fully laden, fully stocked. Considerably better prepared than Loren, who had only one cloth sack to his name.

"Are those your comrades?" The soldier, who had spoken in such good spirits, suddenly sneered.

For a moment, Loren wondered if the man had something against adventurers themselves—but if that was the case, why didn't he hate Loren as well? *Is it because I don't look like an adventurer?*

"More like business partners," Loren clarified. "We're just working together for the one job."

"That so. I don't mean anything by it, but you should cut ties fast. This is just a little theory of mine, but you can't trust a 'good guy' who fills his party with women."

That sounds more like envy than a theory, thought Loren, but he could read the mood well enough to know not to point that out. Keeping it at a tight smile and a shrug, Loren waved goodbye to the soldier and caught up with the man leisurely walking down the main road with three women in tow.

"Did we keep you waiting?" Saerfé asked.

Loren shook his head. The meeting time had been “morning,” which was an incredibly vague interval. What’s more, he had been able to use that time meaningfully. He had no reason to complain.

“Looks like everyone’s here, so let’s be off. Seeing as it would be a pain to walk all the way there, how about we rent a wagon?”

While no one objected to Saerfé’s proposal, Loren stopped in his tracks. When discussing the quest, they had talked about the three-day walk, so he had assumed they would be going on foot.

Even if the cost of the wagon would be shared between them, it would hardly be free. Loren had used his last coin to buy a few days of food and a night at the cheapest inn in town. He was in no situation to pay fare, no matter the price.

Maybe if he walked while the others rode? No, the wagon would arrive long before him. Running, then. His only options were either that or to borrow money. Fine, then, he’d—

All of a sudden, a few coins fell into his hand.

Loren looked at them, startled, and found Lapis, the black-haired girl in the priest outfit, looking up at him with a finger over her lips. As the other members searched for a wagon that would take them through the east gate, Lapis had secretly closed in on him. It didn’t seem anyone else had noticed.

“Are you in need of assistance?” she asked with a grin. Loren didn’t quite know how to respond, and she pressed on before he could. “Ten copper. It’s not much, but it should be enough for a round trip to Ain.”

That’s where we’re going, right? Loren tugged at his memory as he dropped his eyes to the copper coins that had slithered into his hand. He sent a questioning look to Lapis.

“It’s a loan,” she teased. “Don’t think you’re taking anything from me.”

This would be a huge boon. Loren wouldn’t have to tell his party leader that he didn’t have the money. However, a mercenary rarely borrowed anything from anyone. In that life, there was no telling where you’d find yourself from day to day, so you often couldn’t guarantee you’d repay a debt, which paved the road to all manner of disputes.

Is that not the case for adventurers too? thought Loren.

But Lapis just went on, not waiting for his response. “Look at it this way: If you owe me one, I know you’ll help me out if I find myself in a tough spot. It’s a preemptive investment.”

Ah, a calculated choice. That made sense. Loren had a much harder time accepting pure charity. *I should just be grateful, no need to pry into it further*, he thought, discreetly slipping the coins into his pocket while dutifully lowering his head.

Lapis’s smile seemed to say, “Don’t worry about it.”

She chose the perfect time to slip away from Loren, right before Saerfé called from a short distance away.

“We found a wagon! They’ll take us to Ain for five copper a head.”

That was exactly half the sum Loren had borrowed. Relief washed over him as he pulled out five copper coins, and he walked over to where Saerfé beckoned him.



“You’re really helping us out here, man. It felt stupid wasting so much time and energy walking there,” Saerfé enthused at the wagon driver.

The man was middle-aged and from Ain; he had come to Kaffa to resupply at just the right time. His job was to carry Ain’s produce and furs to Kaffa, where he exchanged them for the tools and other supplies his village needed. On the trek over, he had brought an unwieldy mountain of goods, but as he traded them for smaller, more valuable products, there was enough space in his cart to easily seat five extra passengers on the return trip. He had accepted them in hopes of earning extra pay.

“You’re them adventurers who’re gonna take care of our goblin problem, are you? Then I best get you there right quick.”

Then you could’ve just waived the fee, thought Loren.

On the other hand, Saerfé and his cheerful companions were nothing but grateful. They gave absolutely no thought to negotiating the price. It wouldn’t do to be the only one haggling. Loren kept his mouth shut.

Farm horses were bred for strength rather than speed, and they couldn’t be expected to outrun a warhorse. That said, the wagon moved around twice walking pace, and the driver estimated they would arrive before noon the next day, assuming they didn’t keep going through the night.

Spending a day and a half constantly swaying in a horse-drawn wagon was mentally taxing, but Loren had endured it many times as a mercenary, and it wasn’t bad enough to complain. He planned on passing time talking to Saerfé and the others when he felt inclined, hoping to reach some level of mutual understanding.

This plot was quickly foiled, however, as Narron the thief and Oxy the magician monopolized Saerfé’s attention at every opportunity. Loren couldn’t see how he was supposed to butt in.

The wagon stopped only when the last sliver of sun disappeared over the horizon.

“How about we set up camp here?”

People didn't often choose to travel at night. The main roads were generally safe and secure—adventurers dispatched bandits and monsters, as did the soldiers of whatever country the roads belonged to. Even so, it wasn't as if attacks never happened, and that risk kept a wise traveler on their toes. The probability of an attack rose at night, and thus, the only ones who traveled by dark either had no choice, believed in their own might, or didn't know any better.

Certainly, the man from Ain didn't seem to fall into any one of those categories. However, when they'd booked the wagon, Loren had assumed they would be stopping at a relay station along the way. It didn't seem like there was one, though, which meant camping out was the only option left.

Then again, Loren didn't have the funds to rent space in a lodge even if they had found one. He had the coins Lapis had lent him, but five copper would either get him huddled up in a pile with the other guests or a spot in the stables. What's more, he would be losing his return ticket. Either way, camping out was far better than taking another loan.

"Ahh, so tired. My butt hurts."

"Quit complaining. We need to set up camp while there's still light out."

Narron and Oxy climbed down from the wagon, raising their voices without a care as to who might hear. The villager and Saerfé watched on with wry smiles.

Loren surveyed their surroundings and saw no trees or abandoned buildings behind which a monster or bandit could lurk. They had stopped in an open field, but still, Loren scowled. They were strangers here, and there was no telling whose attention their thoughtless sounds would attract. What's more, they had no cover, meaning if they lit a fire, their location would be clear from miles away.

If Loren had his way, they would move a little further, at least until they came to some hills they could shelter near, but he didn't know anything about the local terrain and thus didn't know if any such place even existed.

That villager and Saerfé should know the area better than me. All I can really do is trust them and stay alert, Loren thought, his mood falling.

Saerfé's next line delivered the finishing blow that killed his mood dead. "We'll keep watch, you and me."

"You want...the two of us to stay up all night?"

Counting the villager, they had six people at their disposal. In the time they had until morning, they could set up three relatively painless two-person shifts. Loren couldn't comprehend Saerfé's strategy, having two members go sleepless.

Saerfé's next pronouncement was equally nonsensical. "No, we need our sleep too. We'll rotate between us."

"Only one lookout at a time?"

That was unthinkable to a former mercenary. Obviously Loren's company had been able to put more people on lookout, and he didn't mean to compare Saerfé's party to his company, but when it came to things like lookout and recon, it was common sense to do it in pairs. You only acted alone when it was absolutely necessary—for instance, when someone got stranded away from their team.

"You got a problem with that? Leader's orders, just shut up and do it," Narron scolded. While Oxy didn't say anything, she seemed to share Narron's opinion, and the look in her eyes was cold.

On the other hand, Lapis seemed rather uninterested. She had slept nearly the whole time on the wagon yet still seemed tired. Rubbing her eyes and stifling a yawn, she showed no intention of involving herself with the argument.

Realizing how pointless it would be to push back if he were the only one on his own side, Loren gave up. It was dangerous, sure, but he'd handle it. "Got it. Me and you, who's going first?"

"Could you take the first shift? I'd like to get some sleep."

Hey, isn't this where the leader should step up? Loren thought. But he'd already realized the odds were stacked against him. Arguing now would only lead to more exhaustion. "Loud and clear," he said. "I'll wake you up around midnight. That sound good?"

“Counting on it.” Saerfé’s listless reply and dismissive hand wave made sure that was the end of it.

Loren sighed. He had been hit by an uneasy feeling far too distinct to call a gut check.

Loren’s worries soon turned into reality. Not during the watch, though. That was fine.

The cart had stopped on the road’s shoulder, the horses tethered nearby, and after the party had their meager dinner of rations, there was little left to do. Everyone headed to their own tent, leaving Loren alone to tend the fire and keep a lookout.

He hadn’t been doing that long before the voices caused his expression to stiffen. They came from the tent Saerfé was supposed to be sleeping in. The enraptured moans of two women leaked through the thin, rustling fabric. Loren didn’t make a habit of eavesdropping, but it was quite easy to imagine what was going on inside.

“C’mon, you’re outside, people...” Loren muttered in disbelief. *Ugh, this is going to make it hard to switch shifts.*

He didn’t want to believe they would be at it all night, and yet... Even worse, their campsite wasn’t near any water source. Loren really didn’t want to believe his party would use up their valuable water to clean up afterward. But if they didn’t, the smells and moisture in Saerfé’s tent would grow unbearable. Maybe it would clear up a bit if left to morning, but the vestiges would undoubtedly remain through midnight, when it was time for shift change. Loren felt terribly uninclined to stick his head into that tent.

“Can’t they hold themselves back for just one day?”

What’s more, he could definitely hear *two* women. Although, even if Loren could distinguish two separate voices, he hadn’t known them long enough to tell who was who. The thief girl was almost a guarantee. But the other?

Loren pondered this exceedingly worthless riddle as a means of warding off his drowsiness, all the while readying himself to go the night without sleep.

Don't be too down. It's not all bad, he thought as he lowered his eyes to the flaring fire. Even though sleepiness was setting in, these days, he found he could never rest with any true ease. Up until now, he'd always had someone he knew nearby. Now, he had no one.

Saerfé's party just doesn't do it for me, he thought absentmindedly. They were business partners at best, and in any case, they'd barely gotten to know each other. Never once in his life had he passed so much time without comrades, and thanks to that, his heart was terribly restless.

Just like yesterday. Loren cracked a bitter smile. In the large communal room of the cheapest inn, huddled up with other broke guests, he had fallen into a cycle of shallow sleep and abrupt awakening until the sun rose. It was thanks to this awful night that he had arrived at the meeting spot before the others, and he felt he hadn't resolved any of his fatigue.

It shouldn't be a problem for this job. He considered his physical condition as he snapped a dry branch in two and threw it into the flames.

Sleep deprivation and deteriorating health. These would without a doubt slow his movements and dull his judgment. While they hadn't yet reached a life-threatening level, Loren's body demanded rest.

But he simply couldn't.

What had become of the comrades he lost sight of in the frenetic last moments of that battle? He had been keeping his mind off of them, but that grew increasingly difficult to do as he sat alone in the dark, relying on a fire to watch over nothing.

He frowned. *If they're alive, maybe we'll meet again someday.*

But Loren couldn't stop himself from realizing how low the chance of that was. The battle had been violent and unforgiving. His survival was nothing short of miraculous.

"But no one's going to smite me for having hope, right?" he muttered.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

Surprised that his unconscious words—spoken while he was certain no one

was listening—had elicited a response, Loren’s muscles coiled and he reached for the hilt of the sword beside him.

“Did I startle you? I’m sorry, I wasn’t trying to.” There stood Lapis, frantically waving her empty hands. She still wore her vestments, despite the fact that she should have been sleeping in her own tent.

Seeing that she wasn’t an enemy, Loren tentatively released his weapon. However, he couldn’t fathom why she had approached him so late at night, and he eyed her with full suspicion.

“Truth be told, the tent next door was a bit too...noisy,” Lapis said, as if she’d taken his silence as a question.

Either way, Loren understood where she was coming from, and his doubts dissipated. He could hardly blame her. In short, Loren’s sleep wasn’t the only one Saerfé was ruining. Alas, the tents were only made to provide protection from the cold. They were hardly soundproofed.

Lapis sighed and admitted that if she’d fallen asleep and stayed that way until morning, she might have woken up none the wiser, but as luck would have it, she’d opened her eyes just a bit ago. Even as a priest sheltered from the ways of the world, those sounds were unmistakable. As the noises continued without end, rediscovering sleep’s embrace had proved a herculean task.

“I couldn’t manage it, so, I, well...”

“Yeah, I get it. My condolences,” Loren wearily replied.

For some reason, Lapis chose to sit right beside him, her expression troubled. “Would you mind if I joined you?” she asked. “Until, well...until things settle down.”

You make it pretty hard to say no after you’ve already sat down, Loren thought, though he only nodded. He didn’t really care either way, and it wasn’t like she could sit by anything else apart from the fire.

It might actually be convenient to have her around. Her presence could help him fight off drowsiness. And his responsibility as lookout was to keep an eye on her, which he couldn’t do if he couldn’t see her.

“Are they always like this?” he asked. “I mean, I get that adventuring’s an unsteady trade. Some things you want to take care of when you don’t know if you’ll be around tomorrow.”

Lapis sighed. “I’d like to say, ‘not always,’ but this actually happens more than you’d think. Does it sound too cynical if I say, ‘I’m glad they’re healthy’?”

Loren was somewhat surprised by her response. He had never properly spoken to a priest before. As a matter of fact, he was sure they lived in completely different worlds. He lived by killing, while a priest lived by offering their life to a god. They had nothing in common. The priests he’d known had only come to treat a gravely injured member of his company, and then only when that person was indispensable *and* the company had the surplus funds to afford the treatment. These priests were always nagging old men with difficult expressions who could only be summoned by sizable donations.

However, the sighing girl sitting beside him, speaking thinly veiled vulgarity, was quite a different breed from those old men, and it amazed Loren to think that priests like her also existed in the world.

“I don’t think it’s too much to ask them to choose a proper time and place,” said Lapis. “That said, most gods do teach to ‘be fruitful and multiply,’ so some might say they’re fighting the good fight.”

People hated prying questions. Anyone who chose the mercenary life had a thing or two they didn’t want anyone else to know, and time and again Loren had respected this rule of privacy. As such, deciding what he could and couldn’t ask often confounded him, especially as he could think of countless times a mercenary he knew had asked the wrong question and made a mess of things.

But midnight was a long way off yet, too long to spend with nothing to talk about. And Lapis had an easy air, for a priest. Loren timidly concluded something small would be all right.

“There are loads of those gods or whatnot out there, right?” he said. “Which one were you a priest of again?”

“I serve the god of knowledge, Kuhklu,” she replied. “Although you should be a bit more respectful when referring to gods. I’m not bothered, but from time to time, you’ll run into a priest who’s really particular, so you should be

careful.”

“Thanks for the heads-up. I’m a merc, born and bred. Don’t have much of an education. You’ll have to excuse me on that one.”

“Right, I almost forgot about that. So what made you want to become an adventurer?”

Loren grimaced at the ease with which she dug into his vulnerabilities, but he had a policy against refusing to reply to someone who had properly answered his own questions. After a moment of silence, he curtly replied. “My company’s not around anymore.”

“Oh... I’m sorry. Sounds like I shouldn’t have asked.”

“Nah, it’s fine. Nothing new. Happens all the time.”

Although many mercenary companies called themselves invincible, few ever managed to match that claim. Most went through the cycle of wins and losses, suffering and inflicting casualties in turn. Sometimes new members joined, other times they left. However, at times, an unlucky company suffered such heavy losses it could no longer maintain itself as such. It had just so happened to be his company’s turn this time around. But the rise and fall of companies at large was in itself anything but noteworthy.

“Sure, I could keep it up if I found some other company,” said Loren. “Maybe I will. But I need the funds to get out of Kaffa and find one. Until then, all I have are the skills that might earn me coin.”

“Is that so...ah, Mr. Loren, was it? You *do* look strong.” Lapis’s eyes shifted to the greatsword beside him.

Though it was crude and simple, Loren had gotten plenty of use out of that blade. It had not a single decoration and stood just about tall enough to reach Loren’s chest. Nothing stood out about it besides its bulk and the long, rag-wrapped handle, and it was just as heavy as it looked. It had taken a few years before Loren could use it to his liking, but through many a repair and reforging, he had kept it usable long past its due date.

“Why, its blade is just about as thick as my waist,” Lapis mused.

Was she trying to say the blade was too thick, or was she bragging about her own slenderness? Loren couldn't decide which, so he deftly hoisted it up with his left hand to compare them.

Both the blade and hilt were solid iron, with no measures taken to lighten them.

Lapis's eyes widened in shock. "I'm surprised you can actually hold that."

"It's a two-handed weapon, but you're not always gonna have two hands free. I've trained to swing it in either," Loren said as he stood. He lightly pressed the bare tip of the blade into the ground. "Want to compare?"

"I don't see why not."

Loren had intended that as a joke, but with nothing better to do, Lapis hopped aboard. She jumped up, turned her back to Loren, and pressed it against the erect sword.

"How does it look? I think I have the upper hand."

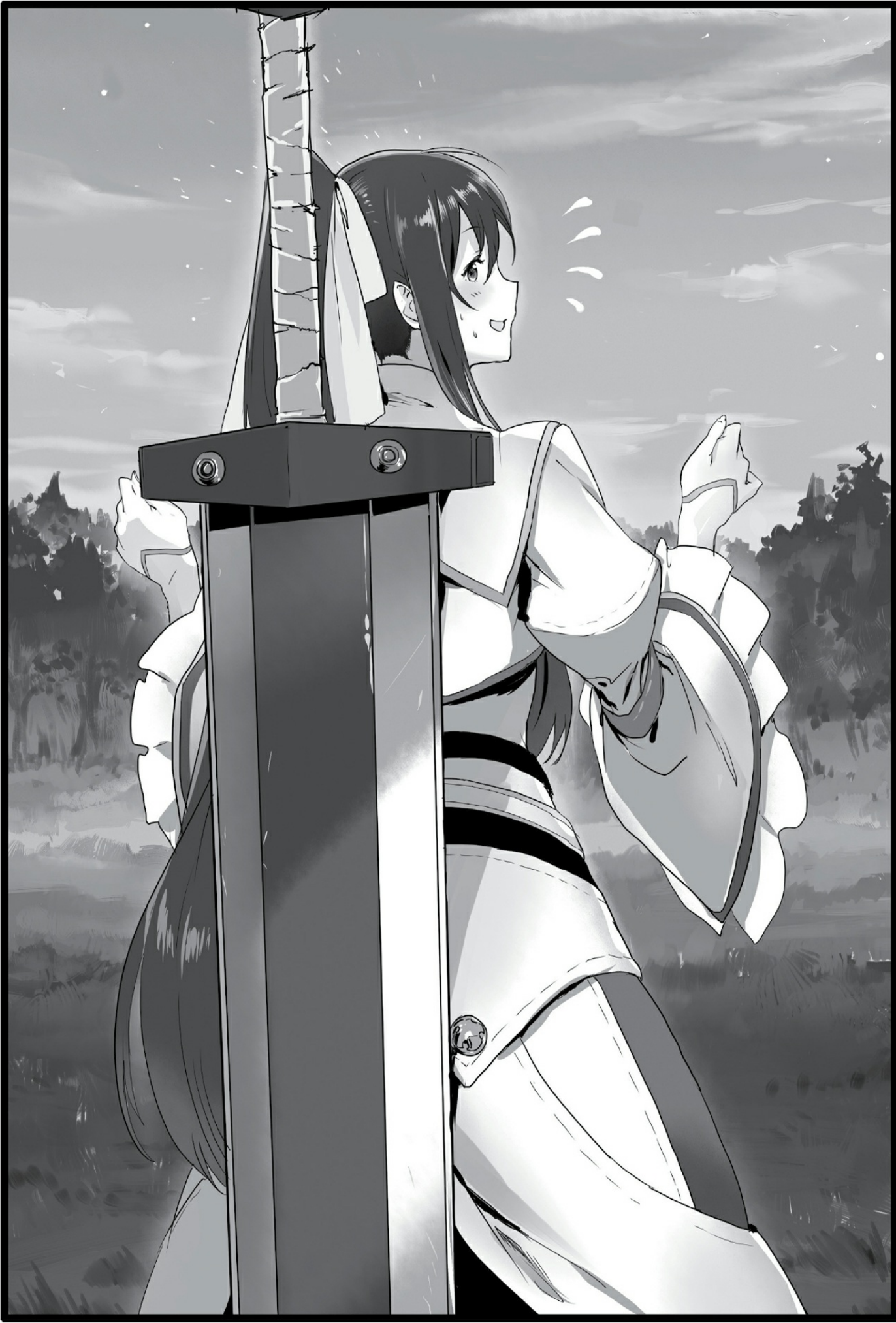
Loren studied Lapis's waist against the metal. Her midsection disappeared behind the blade—which meant she was right, and she was slimmer than the sword. However, when his eyes traced down further, he saw that her hips did extend just slightly beyond the edge. This wasn't due to any particular curviness, just the natural shape of a girl her age.

"H-how is it? Ah... I am thinner than it, right? Huh? Don't tell me..."

Loren's lack of response seemed to fluster her. As silence could at times be a form of kindness, she evidently feared the meaning of Loren's unspeaking stare.

Not the time to say anything about anyone's hips, then. "Yeah, you're right. My weapon's definitely the winner here."

"I know, right? *Obviously*. Ahem, yes, it's only to be expected." Lapis seemed relieved, and she puffed out her chest as if to insist she had never worried at all.



In the end, Loren continued talking with Lapis until morning. He considered rotating shifts with Saerfé at midnight, but he felt an extreme reluctance toward sticking his head into the tent after the activities that had clearly taken place within it. He had ultimately concluded he was better off just spending another sleepless night taking care of things himself.

Said activities finished in a reasonable span of time. Loren expected Lapis to return to her tent at that point, but she didn't. Instead, she volunteered to stay up with him, all the way until morning.

Pure chance gave Loren the two-person watch he had so longed for; he had no reason to refuse. For a moment, he worried inexperience would mean Lapis would suffer a great deal from a sleepless night. However, she told him that novice priests often performed duties that required foregoing sleep, and she had trained to withstand several days without it. Loren took her word for it.

Their conversation mainly drifted from pointless gossip to small talk and back again. Lapis had spent the entirety of her life in the church and she lacked a rich range in conversation topics, but she did her level best to keep the ball rolling and come up with subjects Loren could engage with. He found that quite pleasant.

And yet, he always found himself rather dumbfounded whenever she said she wanted to hear about his mercenary days. Why would a church-raised priest want to hear a tale of bloodstained savages? He cocked his head, but he ultimately decided she probably wanted to acquire as much information as she could to help her make it as an adventurer. He answered her questions to the best of his abilities, and soon enough, it was morning. Somehow, it seemed to have come so quickly.

"Huh? Why's it morning already? What about rotation?" Saerfé sounded confused as he poked his head out of the tent. The morning light had woken him.

"Don't worry about it. What's done is done," Loren replied, taking great care to keep discontentment out of his voice.

Narron and Oxy indecorously shambled out after Saerfé, their clothes still disheveled and rubbing their sleepy eyes. The absolute absence of shame made

Loren's sigh escape his lips before he could even put a complaint into words. Saerfé, meanwhile, awkwardly laughed and scratched his head without a shred of guilt for keeping his party members up all night. Loren decided once again to find another source of income the moment this job was over.

"We'll head out soon as we eat," said the driver. "The village is just a little farther on."

The driver's carefree smile made Loren hold his head—did he not find this questionable? Saerfé's party replied all too energetically, completely oblivious to their misbehavior. Lapis only offered a troubled laugh.

The rest of the journey to the village passed without any particularly noteworthy incidents. Evidently, the local soldiers and adventurers were doing their job ridding the road of danger, and they saw neither head nor tail of monster or bandit.

Ain, newly built and still ramshackle, looked about as normal as it could be, so far as Loren could tell at a distance. Log houses lined the streets, and a rudimentary yet sturdy wall stretched around it. The village did have measures in place to protect it from intruding forces, though their actual usefulness was another matter entirely.

The vegetable fields lay outside the fence, but that was to be expected. The village existed in order to claim new farmland, and if they tried to keep encircling all their claimed territory, they'd need fences for each new field. What's more, the manpower necessary to make fences was already occupied.

Also, while the fence protected the villagers to a certain degree, it couldn't protect them against everything. Living this far in the outlands came hand in hand with danger; the lives people led here couldn't be compared to those of people who dwelt in the bosom of civilization.

Near the village lay a thick, vast forest, the one they would scour for goblins. Loren considered how they would go about this as the party descended the wagon, but Saerfé's sudden pronouncement made him doubt his ears.

"All right, off we go, then. The early bird gets the worm."

Sure, they had time—it was a little before noon—so that wasn't a problem.

"But—we're taking a job from the village," said Loren. "Shouldn't we tell the chief we're here or something? He'll tell us what we need to know about the situation."

"We just have to get rid of the goblins, right?" Narron snapped, as usual. "What else do we need to know?"

"How many of them there are, for one. For another, I won't feel like we're doing a proper job if we don't at least meet the client first."

"Then tell the guy who drove us here to send our regards! How much time do you want us to waste on a simple goblin hunt?"

Simple or not, a job's a job, thought Loren.

But he'd long since realized his party didn't share the sentiment, and he let out his umpteenth sigh. Mercenaries made sure their leader met with the client no matter what, yet what he considered common sense apparently didn't apply to the adventuring trade.

"I'll put in a good word with the chief. If you can get rid of 'em fast, you got my blessing," the villager said.

Narron glared at Loren as if to say, "See? What did I tell you?" She snorted, taking Loren's lack of retort as a sign of defeat.

Saerfé lightly tapped her on the head as a mild scold, then turned to the rest. "We should finish up quickly so the villagers can finally have some peace of mind."

"Of course. We'll get it done without breaking a sweat—we don't even need a certain neurotic mercenary."

"Narron, he's going to be our shield. We're taking him whether you like it or not," Oxy chided.

Hold up, who said I was a shield? Loren's mood soured as his hand crept toward the hilt of the sword on his back. He had nothing against fighting on the front line, but being openly treated as a meat shield was something else entirely.

“Umm, if you get hurt, I’ll use a heal blessing,” said Lapis.

Was she trying to stick up for him or console him?

Either way, Narron objected. “That’s a waste of a good heal. Save it for if Saerfé gets injured.”

“R-right.”

Loren shook his head. “Don’t let them get to you,” he said to Lapis quietly.

Come to think of it, his lack of finances meant he’d brought nothing but food and a blanket—he had nothing in the way of the medicinal salves he’d usually have on hand. While injury wasn’t always a guarantee, one wrong step could easily leave him beyond repair. His mood didn’t improve as he considered the worst-case scenario, where he’d have to shred his own clothes for bandages.

While a dark cloud hung over Loren, it was only sunshine for Saerfé and his followers as they said their goodbyes to the villager. They seriously intended to head into the forest without setting foot in the village. If Loren fell behind, there was no telling what they’d say next.

I don’t need any more reasons to hate myself. He picked up his pace ever so slightly.

“For starters, I’ll take the lead,” said Saerfé. “Narron, you follow me. Oxy and Lapis, stay in the center, and Loren, watch our rear.”

Loren silently nodded. The orders were appropriate but uninteresting. A reliable, sound formation. At least Saerfé had a grasp on the fundamentals of orchestrating a party.

When all was said and done, however, they had jack and squat in the way of information about these so-called goblins from the client, which left them wandering the forest in vain.

This is going to take a while, Loren thought as he kept himself at the ready for any attack from the rear.

It was like fishing without knowing if the river even had fish. Naturally, in this analogy, their party took up the role of bait. If you tossed the bait in a good fishing spot, you could expect a decent catch. But when you haphazardly cast

into unknown waters, it all came down to luck.

“Hey, look, Saerfie. There’s a raspberry bush by your feet,” said Narron.

“Raspberries, eh? I haven’t had one of those in a while. How about we harvest some?” said Saerfé.

“Evening primrose, fox bamboo...there are quite a few decent reagents growing here,” said Oxy.

“Um...Narron? Oxy? Shouldn’t we focus on the goblin hunt? Are you listening?”

Not long into their search, Loren vehemently wished to leave. Lacking basic information, the only way to fulfill their quest was to wander in circles until they encountered the goblins. That didn’t mean getting distracted. Yet here Saerfé’s party was, actually acting on their impulses. Narron and Saerfé went straight to the raspberries, and Oxy to her reagents. None of them listened to Lapis’s timid attempts to rein them in.

Loren had long since given up on telling them anything. In fact, he faintly hoped the ruckus of their selfish distractions would draw a goblin’s interests.

At length, Lapis realized the futility of her actions. She walked over to Loren with a resignation on her face. “Is this really all right?”

He hadn’t come equipped with a response. Ignoring a job in favor of personal interests would be a critical error for any mercenary worth his salt. Loren didn’t know if it was worth scolding them. Seemed more likely to be a waste of breath.

“How ’bout we just let them have their damn way? It’s out of my hands now.” He couldn’t keep his tone from turning gruff.

Contrary to his expectations, Lapis giggled. “Ah, I see you’ve given up, Mr. Loren.”

“And you’re saying you haven’t?”

“I just temporarily lost heart.”

The way she dropped her shoulders took a load off Loren’s mind. *If that’s enough to pep me up, I must be pretty tired.*

He needed this job done, and soon. However, that required the cooperation of Saerfé's party. If he turned tail now, he didn't exactly have any leads on how to pay for the trip back, reimburse Lapis, or buy more food.

Neither the thought of staying nor that of leaving made him feel any more optimistic. For now, watching over Saerfé and his friends was probably his best bet. Narron kept getting distracted by mushrooms and raspberries, and Saerfé lazily followed behind. Oxy, meanwhile, searched high and low for reagents to use in medicines or more unsavory concoctions.

"Woman, I'm surprised you put up with this."

Lapis, sitting at Loren's side, glared at him with somewhat sharper eyes than usual, taking him by surprise. "It doesn't feel nice to be called 'woman,' you know."

Ah, point taken. But that left him with a problem. How did she want to be addressed, then? After a moment, he hesitantly rephrased. "Ms. Lapis?"

"Lapis is fine. Why did you say that like a question?"

"I've never had the chance to call a woman by name."

In fact, the only women Loren had interacted with in any capacity were the occasional female servers in bars, ones he had never visited twice, as the bar changed with every battlefield. The company had relied on specialists to secure food and other supplies, so Loren had rarely even met shop clerks. Regardless, he'd never known anyone outside his company long enough to get on a first-name basis.

"But if you're fine with that, you can call me Loren too."

"Oh no, I insist, it simply must be Mr. Loren."

So that's where you draw the line? Loren frowned.

Lapis hurriedly explained herself, hands waving in a panic. "Well, no, you see, it's just a matter of how I tend to speak. It's not as if I'm trying to keep you at arm's length, Mr. Loren."

"Call me whatever's easiest."

Frankly, her fluster left Loren with an odd sense of relief.

As for the rest of the party, who still weren't paying them the least bit of attention, Loren found himself praying to whatever god would hear. *Won't you please send us a goblin attack soon?*

Chapter 2:

From an Attack to a Confession

THE AIR WAS RELAXED, yet Loren's eyes turned suddenly grim. He grasped the hilt of the sword on his back, and Lapis startled in shock.

"Everyone, freeze! I just heard something!"

A second behind Loren, Narron echoed his warning, sending a wave of tension through the party.

She's too slow for a scout, Loren thought darkly as he surveyed the surroundings. While they stood in the midst of a thick forest, they had reached a small clearing. This gave them an unobstructed field of vision and enough space to fight.

Right hand gripping the hilt of his sword, Loren used his left to tug at the cord fastening the cloth to the blade. The cloth billowed open, revealing the iron edge to the open air. He fluidly drew it one-handed, gripped the pommel with the other, and readied his mind for battle.

Even if a mercenary spent the majority of his time on the battlefield, his mind and body wouldn't hold out if he kept himself steeled around the clock. Loren had seen a number of comrades break that way. Consequently, he had taught himself to shift between mental states at the drop of a hat.

Before he had the time to enjoy the feeling of his own power rippling through his body, he caught sight of the river of shadows moving beyond the dark grove. Small, human-shaped. Considering how deep in the forest they were, and how nimbly the shadows moved, Loren doubted these were children from the village.

"What is it? Monsters?" Saerfé asked Narron. His hand hadn't even touched his sword yet. And while Narron looked around frequently—her ears and eyes straining—she didn't seem to have perceived the approaching shadows, or even the direction they were coming from.

Is this party really going to make it? Loren worried. Should he warn them? Narron wouldn't appreciate it.

In that moment of hesitation, the attack began.

A wave of arrows flew between the densely packed trees. They weren't too fast, and their aim was all over the place; more than half of them landed in trunks or glanced far off their mark. A good dozen made it through, however.

"Erk?!"

Most only peppered the ground around their feet. As luck would have it, one grazed Oxy's shoulder, drawing a meager spray of blood. She failed to contain her yelp, and Saerfé and Narron's eyes darted toward her.

"What are you doing?!" Loren cursed. *You have to know how dangerous it is to take your eyes off the enemy in an ambush!*

So what if they hadn't seen the enemy yet? The arrows' trajectory was clue enough, and looking at the target of the attack rather than the direction it came from was practically handing your life to your foe.

Loren's eyes remained locked on the monsters leaping out of the thicket. Small, ugly, green abominations brandishing crude wooden-board shields and rusted shortswords. Goblins, no doubt about it. This time, he didn't hesitate, and he swung.

His blade met wooden plank. The sword wasn't designed to cut, and its edge couldn't slice through the shield. However, by virtue of its sheer weight and momentum, it smashed straight through with little resistance, crushing the arm of the goblin who held it and cleaving the monster's torso in two.

Before the blood of its lifeless body hit the ground, Loren caught a second goblin in the head with his return swing. A dull sound rang out, a mangled mix of flesh and bone scattered, and another goblin fell dead.

"Dammit! Bloody goblins!"

Finally realizing what the hell was going on, Saerfé drew his sword. Oxy held her shallow wound, shakily prepared to give support, while Narron readied a dagger.

“Need a defense blessing?!” Lapis called out.

“Don’t waste your breath!” Loren barked and swung his sword again. He caught a third goblin, lifting it off its feet and pulverizing its torso against the trunk of a tree. Taking a barrage of arrows with the body of his blade, he peered into the darkness of the wood.

Loren identified the goblins shooting at him, but he clicked his tongue. With all the trees between them, he’d have a hard time closing in. And the foliage would restrict his movements too much to swing his behemoth of a sword.

If only I had a throwing knife—if only I’d managed to keep my shortsword.

Suddenly, Loren’s eye landed on the crude sword clutched by the dead goblin at his feet. He scooped it up, whipped it aloft, and threw it.

The sword spun end over end, trajectory surprisingly stable for its terrible weight distribution, but the distance worked against him. One of the goblin bowmen suffered a light cut, but nothing more.

Need another, Loren thought.

However, the bowmen seemed shocked by the sudden long-range attack. As Loren snatched up another shortsword, they let out a shrill shriek and fled as fast as their legs would take them.

“Don’t run, cowards! After them!” Saerfé brandished his sword, oblivious to the miffed “you didn’t even do anything” look Loren shot him.

Narron and Oxy immediately obeyed Saerfé’s command, but after taking a swing with his sword to flick off the blood stuck to it, Loren motioned for them to wait. “We shouldn’t pursue them too far. We might get more than we bargained for.”

“What are you talking about?” Saerfé demanded. “We took a goblin hunting quest. Now we’ve got our lead. We have to chase them down and wipe out the nest, or I’ll never be able to say I did the job right.”

“That’s right! Who do you think you are, butting in like that? If our leader says chase, you pipe down and chase!” Narron snapped.

Loren sighed and didn’t object further. No matter that goblins were

unintelligent, low-ranking monsters, they weren't just going to leave their nest wide open for attack. Had this quest even said anything about an extermination?

Yes, they would be paid a bonus for each goblin they took out, but the flat fee for the quest in itself was far higher than any amount they could feasibly hope to earn by slaying additional goblins. Rather than risking the danger of storming the nest, Loren thought they'd be way better off filling their quota by taking out goblins foolish enough to wander outside its protection. It might have been worth bringing up if the party cared about Loren's opinion at all.

Hey, it's not like it's my first time working under an incompetent commander, he consoled himself.

Meanwhile, Saerfé's party raced into the forest after the fleeing goblins. Not all of them, though. Much to Loren's surprise, Lapis stuck close to him, keeping pace with his sluggish trawl.

"Your comrades are way up ahead, you know." He didn't mean to betray himself, but when the words came out, they sounded just as discontented as he felt.

"Indeed, they are," Lapis replied without missing a beat. "But I've determined that this spot right here is where I ought to be."

Well, she's their newest member, if I recall correctly. Guess she doesn't know if they're a good fit yet either.

She continued, "I'm not trying to imply anything, mind you. However, isn't it just good fundamentals for a priest or magician to fight while protected by a specific warrior? Mr. Saerfé covers for Ms. Oxy, so I naturally thought my position should be beside you."

"Is that really what you're going with?"

"Why, yes, it is, and I would be quite thankful if you'd play along."

They shared a smile, and with that, Loren didn't feel like pursuing the matter any further. What was the point? He took no issue with Lapis's argument. Any doubts he had remained trapped in the realm of speculation.

That's quite a personality she has there, Loren thought as he and Lapis picked up the pace.

It didn't take a genius to track a fleeing goblin. They lacked the intelligence to cover their trail, and with her skill set, Narron could pursue the traces they left without issue. That said, these traces were clear enough for even Loren to track. If she'd missed them, he would have concluded the thief girl didn't deserve her registered title.

Also, Loren had injured one of the goblins with that chunked sword, and its blood left splotches on the ground, trees, and rocks. Even a complete amateur could follow this particular path.

"Just asking, but...how strong is this party?" Loren asked, feigning nonchalance. He and Lapis still lagged a bit behind Saerfé and the others. The battlefield had taught him the skill to measure distance and his volume so as not to be heard. "Particularly, how good is your leader's sword arm?"

In Loren's company, Saerfé's reaction—or lack thereof—during the goblin attack would have gotten him labeled a failure and retrained from the ground up. Either that, or he would have been shoved on the front line for whatever arbitrary reason they could come up with; it would save them the trouble.

At the very least, Loren didn't love having him for a leader.

"You were formerly a mercenary, weren't you, Mr. Loren?" said Lapis, not even pausing to think about it. "In that case, have you heard about the mercenary called the Blade Fiend?"

"I've heard the name, at least."

Most mercenaries knew it. The Blade Fiend, a legendary mercenary said to guarantee victory for his clients and death for their enemies. He wasn't the only mercenary with a moniker, but word was he outmatched the rest. Only the Infernal Edge, who dealt in both sword and magic, or the Cleaving Gale, another famous swordsman, could even hope to compare.

His name didn't only float in mercenary circles either. The general public knew the Blade Fiend as a swordsman you never wanted to meet on a

battlefield. While those who met him as an enemy died, even those who met him as an ally stood to lose. A mercenary's livelihood depended on achieving recognition in war—it led to further work. Given that the Blade Fiend's skill often won him all the glory, other mercenaries often kept him at arm's length.

“You're not gonna tell me his sword hand rivals the Blade Fiend's, are you?”

“If I were to describe Mr. Saerfé's skills, I'd say you could get ten million of him, and I believe he still wouldn't be able to defeat the Blade Fiend.”

Loren didn't understand the point of that comparison, but the takeaway was that Saerfé barely knew which end of the sword to hold. No matter the Blade Fiend's individual strength, pitted against ten million enemies, he would eventually falter and lose. Loren couldn't fathom just how weak someone had to be in order to fail at those numbers.

“And you're entrusting your lives to that guy? Are you sane?”

“Why, you're in the very same shoes, Mr. Loren.”

“Yeah, sorry. Got no money, so I can't vouch for my decisions.” Sans financial troubles, Loren would never have chosen to be an adventurer in the first place. “Being broke does things to you. It's not that I can't think clearly, more like my thoughts don't mean anything. Like I've got no way around my problems but through.”

“That's... How should I put this. My condolences?”

Why did you phrase that as a question?

Loren stopped without warning, and Lapis scrambled to hit the brakes beside him. Ahead, Saerfé held up his hand, ordering them to wait. The group converged.

“There's a cave up ahead. That's probably the goblins' nest.” Perhaps Saerfé thought he had lowered his voice, but it carried farther than he seemed to be aware of. “The blood trail leads here, and Narron says there's no doubt about it.”

This is hopeless. Loren massaged his temple. “Are you going to charge in? In that case, I'd like to excuse myself.”

The cave looked hardly wide enough to fit two people walking side by side. It would be near impossible for Loren to swing his bulky weapon within those narrow confines.

“Then run home alone,” mocked Narron, concealed in a nearby thicket to get a better look at the cave. “Without pay, of course.”

“It’s just goblins. It should be fine, right? If you’re worried about your weapon, why not try this one?” Saerfé held out a rusted shortsword one of the goblins had wielded. “I thought it might be useful, so I took it with me.”

While mildly impressed by this unexpected shrewdness, upon evaluating the crude construction of the sword, Loren concluded it would be more useful as a cudgel than as a blade.

Better than nothing. He gave up. So, rewrapping the cloth around his greatsword and draping it over his back, he let the blunt shortsword dangle loosely from his hand.

“Oxy, use your magic to light the place up. Narron, stay alert. We’ll press on if we don’t run into any issues.”

You didn’t bring a lantern or torch or something? What was in all that luggage? Loren didn’t even know how many times he had sighed by now. He had long since stopped counting. Of course, he didn’t have a light source either, unless he wanted to set fire to himself.

“No lookouts, and I don’t detect any ambushes or traps nearby.”

“All right, in we go. They might have some abducted villagers in there. Let’s hurry and get this done.”

Oxy gingerly raised her staff. “Let there be light. *Lighting.*” Its tip began to emit a warm, magical glow.

We’re not even in the cave yet. Why are you wasting your magic here? thought Loren, but his head, too filled with resignation and dread, had no room for the motivation to retort.

“Are we good? Then let’s go.”

Completely ignorant of Loren’s inner monologue, Saerfé nodded at Oxy. He

inched from their hiding spot in the shadows of the trees to the mouth of the cave.

This is definitely a trap. Loren was certain of it. Didn't matter how simpleminded goblins might be—if they were smart enough to run, they had to be smart enough to post lookouts outside their nest. Even beasts of instinct knew to watch the edge of their flock. Such were the laws of nature.

And yet, he saw no goblins near the entrance.

“Were they in a hurry? Lucky for us, they didn't leave any lookouts.”

Saerfé's thoughtless mutter made Loren consciously stop intaking all sensory information coming to his ears. Otherwise, his soul wouldn't last through this job. The rest of the conversation barely entered his brain, reduced to meaningless background noise.

“The blood trails continue down into the cave. No doubt they went in,” said Narron.

“In the end, they're just goblins. I doubt an injured beast has much time to think about strategy,” said Oxy.

“What are your thoughts on the matter, Mr. Loren?” Lapis asked.

Loren intended to maintain his silence, but maybe talking with Lapis would help. He decided to humor the girl peering into his face with strangely intense curiosity.

“It's a trap. Inviting us in like this means they're ready to meet us inside, on their own turf.”

“Are goblins smart enough to do that?”

“I don't know goblins. But monkeys have lookouts. And goblins don't look dumber than monkeys.”

“The difference in intelligence between monkeys and goblins? Now that sounds like a somewhat interesting debate.” Lapis placed a hand on her chin, appearing to ponder the question with all seriousness.

This left Loren with a different sense of exasperation than he got from the rest of Saerfé's party. Perhaps she couldn't help thinking that way, being a

priest of the god of knowledge, but there was a time and place—hadn't she said that herself?

"Are you on the side that sees goblins as smarter than monkeys?" she asked.

"Well, of course they are," he answered sincerely. To his surprise, he found himself invested in the question. She really was distracting.

"Is it really so obvious? I don't see it that way. Monkeys, for one, form societies, and they can use tools to a certain degree. They are animals that learn and study. There isn't much of a difference between them and humans."

Loren was hard-pressed to counter that. Firstly, he didn't really know enough about goblins to prepare a well-reasoned rebuttal. Secondly, he'd classed goblins as smarter than monkeys purely on gut instinct, not logical thought. Thirdly, if he accepted her proposal, didn't that mean accepting that there wasn't much difference between humans, monkeys, and goblins, intellectually speaking?

The words escaped his lips nearly before he thought them. "Which means we shouldn't underestimate them?"

Lapis stared long and hard at his face, gulped, and nodded once.

As they spoke, Saerfé's party proceeded further and further in. Thanks to Oxy's magical light, Loren could follow them even if he and Lapis trailed somewhat behind, but he couldn't help feeling they were going far too fast. Neither could he shake the sense that they were being incredibly careless.

Just as he mustered the wherewithal to tell them this, circumstance beat him to the punch. Saerfé stopped, right where the straight path turned into a gentle curve.

"There's a light in the room the path opens into," Saerfé said.

If that's true, then they can see Oxy's light from their position too, Loren thought. But surely Saerfé realized that.

"Are the goblins laying an ambush?" Narron asked thoughtfully.

"It's somewhat troublesome that they have archers," Oxy said.

They sounded awfully carefree.

Saerfé seemed to weigh his options, and at length, he turned back to the others with resolve on his face. His proposition: “I’ll stand at the lead and block the arrows while pushing forward. Everyone else, please support me.”

Charging head-on at archers lying in wait? You’ve got some guts. Loren had transcended exasperation, putting him just barely in the realm of true awe. A direct assault with no cover, and no space to evade left or right. No matter what weaklings they faced, confronting multiple archers under those circumstances was suicide. Even that was putting it lightly.

“Do you want me to cast *Protect*?” Oxy offered, holding out her staff. As Saerfé nodded, she closed her eyes, focused her spirit, and cast her magic.

Loren’s jaw dropped; he couldn’t keep quiet about this. He was watching a magic that could only be used three times a day get wasted on a thoughtless charge. Before he could speak up, however, Lapis tugged on his sleeve.

“You look unhappy.” She almost sounded like she was teasing him.

Just like that, Loren lost the will to argue. “Who knows?”

“Incidentally, Mr. Loren. If you were in charge here, what measures would you take?”

What good will knowing that do you? Nevertheless, he answered her—why not? “I’d stuff the cave entrance with wood and light it up.”

That was, in his experience, the simplest and most reliable means to start an assault on someone holed up in an enclosed space. Granted, he didn’t know how large the interior of this cave was, but the smoke and heat produced by burning wood quickly filled such spaces and killed almost everything with a respiratory system.

“You’d need oil to pull that off, wouldn’t you?” said Lapis.

Freshly cut wood was exceedingly difficult to burn. In order to produce the effect Loren envisioned, he would either have to dry out the kindling or soak it with copious amounts of oil.

“No oil and no flint. If that was ruled out, I’d shrug and go home,” Loren offhandedly replied. Not that he could. That’d just dig a hole in his heart as

deep as the hole in his pocket.

“I see.” Lapis looked satisfied and said no more on the matter.

However, Saerfé called over to him. “You’re going out front with me.”

“I didn’t get any protective spells.”

“You have that oversized sword. Can’t you use it as a shield?” Oxy said with a frown.

Narron vigorously nodded along, in full support of the notion.

“Sorry,” said Saerfé. “We don’t have enough magic to cast two *Protect* spells. I’ll support you, don’t worry.”

“Fine, got it. Man, I really am out of luck.”

All Loren had to attack was the rusty goblin shortsword. He could hardly count on it to block a flying arrow, and if he were to use his greatsword as a shield, its size and weight would hinder his movements. He gripped the shortsword nevertheless. *It’s not like I’ve never reluctantly obeyed hopeless orders before.*

Perhaps taking that as a sign of readiness, Saerfé brandished his longsword and raised his voice, “All right, let’s go!”

The enemy definitely heard that one, Loren thought gloomily, but he still chased after Saerfé as he jumped out.

In the end, the goblins proved smart enough to figure out what the hell was going on. A salvo of arrows came flying from the end of the corridor. A little ahead of Loren, Saerfé tried to swipe them down with his sword but failed miserably. Even so, his protection magic weakened the already weak arrows, and they clattered to the ground after only lightly scratching his leather armor.

Well, I’ll be damned. Magic’s convenient. Loren was rather impressed. He used the shortsword to strike down an arrow that slipped past Saerfé. The arrow fell to the ground, snapped in half rather than sliced. “This thing is terrible.”

But he had no time to bemoan the dullness of his blade. Loren followed Saerfé as he leapt into the chamber where the goblins awaited.

There, Loren came to an abrupt stop. Saerfé keeled over, falling flat toward the goblins.

“Saerfé!”

Narron rushed in to help him. A little further behind her, Oxy and Lapis raced right past Loren. Team order collapsed around him.

“Hey, wait!” Loren warned, and he just barely managed to grab Lapis’s collar to stop her.



She snarled at him, but upon seeing Oxy tumble and fall just like Saerfé, she gasped in shock. “A trap?!”

“Looks like one of ‘em’s got a brain!”

Across the floor slashed a shallow ditch just deep enough to fit a foot, perfectly camouflaged by the uneven ground. This simple trap took no more than a little effort to produce, but it had gone unnoticed, and even worse, both Saerfé and Oxy had fallen for it.

“Saerfé! Get up!”

Presented with such defenseless targets, the archers showed no mercy. A salvo of arrows flew at Saerfé, and while Narron managed to strike a few of them down with her dagger, the ones she couldn’t block pierced her right flank as well as Saerfé’s right shoulder and left thigh.

“Dammit! How dare you!” Oxy cursed as she retreated and prepared to cast magic.

Loren, meanwhile, analyzed the goblins’ formation. Close to ten goblin archers lined the end of the corridor, and a troop armed with shortswords and clubs began to shamble out from behind them. Even further back, one goblin, larger than the rest, held a staff of animal bone, a strangely glossy gold ornament hung from its neck.

“So that’s their leader,” Loren muttered.

Lapis gave up on shaking free of his grasp and squinted. “Is that a goblin magician?”

“That an evolved form? That ain’t good.”

With their fearsome reproductive power, goblin populations grew at an incredible rate. As a simple matter of probability, every so often, one with a unique ability was born. In some cases, otherwise normal goblins mutated into abnormal forms over the course of their lives.

Scholars called these “evolved forms” and considered them several times more dangerous than a normal goblin. A group of goblins led by one of these evolved entities inevitably proved several times more dangerous than one

without.

Even among evolved forms, a goblin magician was rare. These creatures had not only awakened to knowledge of the mystic arts, they also possessed the relevant abilities to use them. Such beings were terribly dangerous.

If we face that thing without preparing for it, we're screwed, Loren concluded, and he immediately searched for a means of retreat. However, Saerfé and Narron, closest to the goblins, could hardly move with their arrow wounds, and Oxy was already chanting.

“What a pain...”

I should probably warn them—tell them to get them out of the way, at least—but I don't think I can reach them all, Loren thought as he glanced behind to confirm their evacuation route. At this, his mind blanked. “We’ve been pincered!”

He had been certain they followed a single straight path all the way into the cave, but perhaps due to the poor lighting, or because he’d been distracted, or because he had grown careless—whatever the case, a sea of goblins advanced down the path they’d come from, led by a few larger specimens.

“Do we really have to do this?!” Loren snarled.

With both the front and back blocked, there was nowhere to run. Loren’s only option was to break the goblins’ guard—one way or another.

As he summoned his resolve, Oxy unleashed her magic. “May scattered sand shut their eyes! *Sleep!*”

Her motions and eyeline directed the magic at the goblins in front of them—not behind. Loren mentally clicked his tongue at that decision. Oxy likely thought to save Saerfé, who lay vulnerable before the archers. But if they wanted to get out of this damn cave alive, then targeting the goblins behind them would have made things a lot easier.

That said, Oxy seemed fixated on her fallen comrades—she had yet to notice the group closing in from behind.

Still, if we can break through the enemies in front, it'll be better than being

attacked from both sides. Loren changed his trajectory and waited for the magic to take effect.

At that moment, for a brief instant, the goblin magician's necklace glowed. Loren tensed. In concert, for some reason, he felt a weight in his hand. Lapis's body had fallen limp, and she dangled in his grip by the collar. She had buckled at the knees. Loren hurriedly released her neck, lending her a shoulder before she could fall.

"Hey! What happened?"

"This is..." she muttered, sounding not all the way there.

Before Loren could assess her condition, Oxy shrieked, frantic. "No way! Why?!"

Loren realized why soon enough. Oxy had cast *Sleep*, yet not a single goblin had fallen unconscious. The close-range fighters rushed out in front of the archers and fell on Saerfé and Narron.

"You fiends! Get away!"

"St-stop! Let go of me!"

With shoulder and leg injured, Saerfé could neither stand nor swing his weapon. With a wound to her flank, Narron was likewise unable to properly face the goblins, and the horde swiftly pinned her to the ground.

"Hey! Get away from Narron!" Saerfé howled. Try as he might to save his friend, the merciless onslaught of crude goblin weaponry beat him down.

The sound of near-edgeless shortswords tearing through flesh, of clubs snapping bone, of Saerfé's shrieks, of Narron's clothes being torn away—all these the sounds mixed in sickening chaos before being drowned out by Narron's screams.

Face pale, hands shaking, Oxy gripped her staff, unable to do anything but watch, until she too was caught by the goblins swarming up from behind. They dogpiled her body before she could let out a sound.

There was no helping them now. By the time he reached that conclusion, Loren's legs had already moved.

For a moment, he thought of leaving Lapis behind. She had lost the use of her limbs, been left too weak to even hold on to Loren's shoulder. She was nothing but baggage, and unnecessary at that. If he left her, not only would he be nimbler, she could be a distraction to slow the goblins. The ranks would thin, and it would be far easier for him to break through. At most, the issue lay in his conscience, and what compromise he would eventually have to reach with it. Considering the merits of abandoning her, it hardly seemed like an issue.

When he looked down at her, she let out a slight, short sigh. "It's hopeless. Leave me."

Her tone was different than usual, her words short and rough. But rather than the sudden change in tone, Loren was surprised by the offer.

"I'm in the way, aren't I?" she said. "That lot won't kill a woman. But a man is good as dead. Leave me here, I won't blame you."

Resignation haunted her words. However, again, what tickled his emotions wasn't her tone, but what she *said*—almost as if she was thinking about him, not herself. And for that, he kept his silence. He gripped the shortsword in his left hand and hoisted her under his right arm.

"Huh?"

"Better not talk. You'll bite your tongue."

Tightening his grip on Lapis's waist, Loren gritted his teeth, took another step forward, and accelerated. The shrieks and the screams, the strange grunts Lapis let out in his arms—none of these entered his ears.

His blade swept through the neck of a goblin blocking their way. It was more a tearing through than a severing, and once its head had left its body, he kicked its torso aside. Another goblin came at him after that, and once he smacked his sword into its forehead, its whole skull cracked open. The blade was stuck, wedged in goblin bone with only the handle coming free.

Loren didn't have to look to tell what had happened. He threw the hilt at another goblin and snatched the club from the goblin whose head he'd cleaved. Then he lunged forward and accelerated even further.

He skidded past a disassembled Saerfé in a puddle of blood, then hurtled past

Narron, who had been stripped bare and pinned to the ground. One goblin at a time, he closed in on the archers.

Several arrows shot at him point-blank. No matter how unskillful these goblins archers were, they couldn't fail to hit him at that distance. Yet not a single one landed. They whizzed fruitlessly through thin air.

Baffled by how they could have missed, the outermost archer suddenly ate a powerful flying kick that sent him flying into the others, toppling them over. The second the archers had fired, Loren had swiftly leapt sideways and kicked off against the wall before launching himself into them in a three-point turn.

Loren didn't stop to survey the extent of the damages, instead pressing even further at unbelievable speed, especially given his passenger. He charged at the goblin magician beyond the archers.

The magician, of course, didn't twiddle its thumbs and wait. It grunted some incantation, pointed its finger, and manifested a fiery orb smaller than its fingertip. This was the spell *Fire Bullet*, elementary in nature, but it flew far faster than arrows. While Loren avoided a fatal hit, he took it on his left shoulder.

He grit his teeth to bear the pain as the spell burst and seared his flesh black. It wouldn't slow him down. The goblin magician had seemed so confident when it fired its shot, but seeing Loren charge at him undeterred, its face contorted in surprise, and it scrambled to prepare its next spell.

"Too late!"

Loren wouldn't give it the chance. Using the momentum of his charge, he cut off every flaring signal of pain from his shoulder and swung the club.



The magician's head took the blow directly to the temple and burst.

The wooden club didn't fare much better. Loren tossed aside the splintered handle, grabbed the strange glowing necklace off the magician's falling body, and yanked on it so hard he snapped it off the chain.

"You should really get rid of that," muttered Lapis, who glanced at it sideways from his midsection.

But that was the least of Loren's worries at the moment. He plunged into the passageway behind the goblin magician.

This was in the direction opposite from the entrance, but the sheer number of goblins behind him forced him to take this path. As a result, he fled farther and farther into the cave, where he risked running in a circle or a dead end. For now, he ran, and he prayed for a detour that would allow him to outmaneuver the goblins and get out.

"Can't believe you run so well without a light," Lapis mused. While her tone was calm, she had lost her usual polite air.

Was she putting on an act before? A question for later.

The goblins behind them had food and spoils. For the moment, they would be too occupied to pursue a fleeing foe. Soon enough, they would realize the need to chase them. Loren wanted as much distance as he could get before that.

"Don't tell me you can actually see in here?" snorted Lapis.

"Shut up, seriously. I'm losing focus."

As one might expect, Loren couldn't see a thing as he ran down the path of the lightless cave. However, during his mercenary days, he had picked up the art of using the echoes of his own footsteps to get a general idea of his surroundings. It was mainly a skill used for preparing an ambush or other such scenarios where he couldn't light a fire. In such times, he still had to be able to maneuver to a degree, though the accuracy of this technique didn't allow for much beyond that. If he lost focus for only a moment, he risked tripping on uneven ground or running straight into a wall. This was no time to keep Lapis company.

“Hey, it’s boring being hauled around like so much baggage.”

“Do I look like I care? Our lives are at stake here. Please, just shut your mouth.”

“Perhaps you have a point. Oh, then let’s do this.”

No sooner had Lapis spoken than a soft, white light lit up their surroundings. Loren shielded his eyes from it until he noticed the light came from around his own chest—that is to say, the girl under his arm had clearly produced it. He frowned down at her, slowing a bit.

“Can you see now? Then quit holding me like a sack of potatoes, would you? I won’t ask for a princess carry, but would it kill you to give me a piggyback or something? What do you say?” As she proposed this, she dangled as limply as ever.

Sure, he could have just ignored her, but Loren sensed something ominous about this situation. He gently set Lapis down on the floor, then lifted her onto his back.

The moment Lapis was on his back, her tone suddenly turned courteous again. “Yes, that’s much better. Now, with that said: Mr. Loren, you have my utmost gratitude for saving me.”

What’s that supposed to mean? he wondered as he took in their situation with his newfound light.

“But I wonder, why did you save me of all people? You abandoned all the others.” When Lapis asked this, it didn’t sound the least bit accusatory. It was as if she had a simple question and desired a simple answer.

“It was a whim,” Loren replied, somewhat annoyed. “Or you were lucky. Or because I never returned your copper. Pick whichever one you want. The right answer’s probably somewhere in there.”

“How about because Mr. Loren is kind? Does that one not work?”

“Then I wouldn’t have abandoned the others,” he replied with a bitter smile. He got the feeling she was mocking him.

But Lapis didn’t seem put off by his response. She leaned into Loren’s

shoulders, and answered quietly, “But I, for one, was saved. So I’ve decided to choose that one. You don’t mind, do you?”

“Do whatever you want,” he replied. As far as Loren saw it, whatever Lapis thought was of no consequence to him.

“Then I’ll do just that,” she laughed.

“By the way, what was that?” Loren asked.

By now, Loren had been jogging a while with Lapis on his back. Her body squirmed restlessly, perhaps uncomfortable with having his greatsword pushing against her, but he still didn’t feel any strength in the arms wrapped around his neck, or the legs under his forearms.

“What might you be referring to?” Lapis brought her face a little closer to his shoulders. This naturally led her to push her body against his, but owing to the sword between them, the only sensation he felt was hard metal.

“Did you not notice you were speaking differently? Is that your normal tone or something?”

Her squirming suddenly stopped.

Did I hit where I shouldn’t have? Loren wondered. But they would be stuck together for the foreseeable future, and he wanted as much information as he could get. “Your body’s strange too. You suddenly stopped moving. You sick or something?”

“Is that something I have to answer?” Her slight hesitation said blatantly that she didn’t want to talk about it.

Loren wondered if it was, indeed, necessary information. He got the feeling he would ultimately learn something he really didn’t care to know, but sometimes important tidbits were hidden in what seemed inconsequential. Considering his current situation, he couldn’t dismiss any possibilities.

That said, Loren wanted to avoid digging up secrets that might ruin their relationship. Now that everyone else in their party had been done in by goblins, Lapis was his only ally.

“I’m not gonna force you, but maybe I’d have a better idea of what to do if you did.” In the end, he passed the buck back to her. He had been honest. Now it was on her.

“You’re right. After you saw all that, I might as well tell you.” Lapis took some time to get her thoughts in order, then brought her mouth up to his ear to whisper.

I guess it doesn’t matter what they’re saying. Having a woman whisper in your ear sends shivers down your spine, Loren thought. He focused his ears on her words, his eyes on his surroundings, his legs on pressing forward.

“Mr. Loren, if I may ask, how much do you know about demons?”

He nearly stopped at that question, but he quickly recalled he was in no situation to do so. Keeping up a jog, he reached for what little information he had about demon-kind.

One: Generally speaking, they were beings who didn’t interact with humankind.

Two: The world was rife with races, ranging from demihuman-kind to beast-kind, with each forming their own society in which to live and thrive. Demons were one such race. But their reputation wasn’t especially great.

Three: They didn’t just distance themselves from humans; they barely interacted with any of the other races. Just going off the name “demon,” one would expect them to be evil or something, and of course, some of them were cruel. But the ones who didn’t go out of their way to be known as villains weren’t a complete mystery either. Non-demons actually knew a surprising amount about the race as a whole.

Four: While demons possessed powerful physical abilities and magical aptitude, they generally disdained the rest of the world and its inhabitants. In fact, it was said they didn’t care how they treated others in the service of their own self-interest. That was apparently the main source of their ill repute. However, to quote a fellow mercenary, “If that’s all there is to it, that describes plenty of humans I know.” In the end, no two people were alike, and Loren’s company had taught him that he was better off not judging someone just for being a demon.

Five: Appearance-wise, demons were indistinguishable from humans, save for their eyes, which were a deep purple.

Six: At times, a “demon lord” stepped up to plunge the world into a state of great terror, but as the title implied, a demon lord was literally just the name for whatever guy reigned over the demon race. As such, demons weren’t necessarily out to conquer the world even when their lord was, and monsters hated demons as much as they hated everyone else.

Loren spoke each of these thoughts as they came to him. Once he finished, Lapis nodded, then casually declared, “I just so happen to be one of those demons.”

“You’re kidding me.”

As far as Loren knew, demons didn’t believe in gods; in fact, the various churches shunned demons for that very reason. And a god would never lend power to a nonbeliever. That Lapis proclaimed herself both a priest and a demon was, simply put, a nonstarter. On top of that, her face was at that moment quite close to his, and from what he saw, her eyes were just as black as her hair.

“Certainly, I have not an iota of faith in the Supreme Lord or the Great Mother Earth, but my kind’s interests do tend to align with those of the god of knowledge.”

While each god reigned over a different aspect of the world, they all largely preached to their adherents to be peaceful and love thy neighbor and all that. According to Lapis, the teachings of the god of knowledge didn’t contain a word of such moralizing. He taught his followers only to seek knowledge, and then seek more of it. These teachings were ones even demons could accept, and thus the god had garnered himself a small but devout demonic following.

“Magic is a facet of knowledge, you see. With the other gods, it’s impossible to use magic by the point you learn to use blessings.”

That was indeed what had surprised Loren when Lapis produced a magic light. As far as he knew, priests could only borrow power from their god to perform blessings, and no priests could also use magic.

“Then can human priests of the god of knowledge use magic too?”

If that was the case, members of their priesthood could fulfill two roles in military operations; no matter how high a price they commanded, they would be in great demand as both adventurers and mercenaries.

“There may be a few who can use it to a degree, but I doubt any are as good as me. I mean, I’m a demon. It’s pointless to compare my abilities to those of mere humans.” Lapis sounded just a little proud of herself.

And rightfully so, thought Loren. While he didn’t have a full picture of her abilities, both magic and blessings were rare and sought after. If Lapis possessed the ability to perform both, he didn’t blame her for being a little bit conceited.

“So why’s a demon faffing about as an adventurer? Aren’t demons generally holed up in those central mountains? They rarely come down to speak to us lowly mortals.”

That was why demons rarely interacted with the other races. Sure, their terrible reputation and high and mighty personalities also played a role, but it ultimately came down to territory. They’d taken up residence in the center of the continent, in a region surrounded by tall, rocky mountains. It was physically considerably difficult for anyone to go in *or* come out. The reason they’d chosen to live there was subject to much speculation, and Loren didn’t know anything for certain. However, the most prominent theory held that they had retreated there and secluded themselves after facing persecution in a prior era.

“To tell you the truth, we actually visit the outside world quite often,” Lapis said. This ran contrary to everything Loren knew. “We just don’t get found out. See, we look pretty similar to humans, and as long as we’re careful, we’ll simply be seen as exceptionally talented individuals.”

Is that really how it works? Loren wondered. Be it magic or swordplay, those with a certain level of skill had a certain aura to them, and while there was the occasional exception, he at least could usually pick up on it quite quickly.

His unspoken question evidently got across. Lapis went on: “Those skilled enough to be found out at a glance aren’t allowed to just blithely enter human territory. A restriction is placed on them first.”

“A restriction?”

“Yes, that’s...well, that would be the explanation for my current predicament.” Lapis feebly lifted the right hand she had slung around Loren’s neck. It moved with dreadful slowness, and it seemed it would take a while before she could move normally. “These are fake, you know?”

“What?”

“Currently, my limbs and eyes are magically enchanted artificial prosthetics. I can move them by sending mana signals, and you can’t imagine how much power they consume.”

Lapis raised her hand to Loren’s eye level, and he stared at it. From what he could see, it looked like real flesh and blood, even though she claimed it was an imitation. He couldn’t detect a single flaw.

“Did you notice how Ms. Oxy’s magic failed to activate?” she asked.

Loren had picked up on that. Oxy’s magic had failed to affect the goblins, and that failure had factored into the party’s collapse.

“That was probably because the goblin magician activated *Disjunction* or some similar effect. That’s not a spell a goblin should be able to use, not even a goblin magician. I presume he picked up an enchanted item.”

Disjunction was a spell that dispersed mana with mana, rendering it impossible to exercise magic within a certain range. However, according to Lapis, the amount of mana it took and the difficulty of the spell sequence rendered it far above goblin capability.

“And as it can’t be done with a goblin’s paltry mana capacity, I have to assume the tool itself accumulates mana.”

“Are you talking about this?” Loren flashed the necklace he had torn from the magician’s neck.

After staring at its plain, unornamented gold finish a while, Lapis nodded. “Probably. Though that leaves the question: What was a goblin doing with an item enchanted with a spell that would be difficult for even a human magician to use?”

Lapis had told Loren to get rid of the necklace when he first obtained it. She had likely sensed it was what had stolen her freedom, but judging by her gradual recovery of movement, it wasn't permanently active. Lapis had also said it accumulated mana. Meaning that after a certain amount of time, it would store enough mana to be used again. Loren stuffed it back into his pocket.

"Regarding the eyes, I managed not to lose any functionality this time around."

"I see. And what about your tone?"

"That...was my natural speech, I admit. But this manner comes naturally to me as well. Rather, this is how I usually speak." She somehow sounded like she was making excuses. "And this has nothing to do with me being a demon either. How should I put this—it's like a mindset I switch to in the midst of combat."

"Oh?"

"Thanks to the rather critical nature of the situation, as I had lost the use of my arms and legs, I naturally swapped over to that state."

Loren could accept that explanation. He himself consciously switched his mindset between moments of peace and violence. Even if that change for Lapis was so major that it seemed to affect her entire personality, it wasn't out of the realm of possibility.

"I see. I get the gist."

"When I told you to leave me, it was the best answer I could summon at the time. Yet I'm thankful you ignored the suggestion and carried me all the way here, Mr. Loren."

Loren couldn't look Lapis straight in the face, but when he glanced over his shoulder, he met earnest eyes. Her words came from the heart.

"We demons might not have the best reputation, but we never let a debt go unpaid."

"That so. Well, we can get to that eventually. But it will have to be after we survive this cave," he said bluntly, as if to hide a touch of unanticipated embarrassment.

Chapter 3:

An End to an Exploration

“DON’T YOU THINK there’s something strange about this cave?” Lapis suddenly said.

Loren took his eyes off the path for a split second. He glanced at Lapis over his shoulder. He had been jogging a while, yet the cave went on and on.

“I’m sure you’ve brought us a considerable distance from where we encountered the goblins, but the end of this cave is nowhere in sight.”

Exactly. Even weighted down by his passenger, jogging for such a span of time should have brought them quite a long way. They had passed a few branches and rooms, each room stuffed with various junk the goblins had probably gathered. The last one of these had been quite a while ago, and since, it had been nothing but corridors.

But they didn’t seem any closer to the innermost depths. Furthermore, the cave seemed to maintain a set width, its passages carrying on endlessly.

“I was sure the goblins had just picked out a random natural cave as their nest, but this is abnormal,” said Lapis. “Something is clearly wrong.”

“Seriously. How far does this damn cave go?”

If Loren ran into a dead end, he intended to retrace his steps and take an alternative route, but it was like every path he chose had no ending. If the cave had been made by natural means, the paths should have constricted over time, even if only a little; but no matter how far he went, he was met with passages of the same consistent width.

Sure, the ground and walls and ceiling all looked to be unrefined rock, but he was beginning to wonder if, somehow, it was manmade.

“Should we turn back?” he proposed. A practical dread was creeping up on him—that they were getting too far in. However, they essentially had a single straight path back, which would force them to pass through the room with the

remains of Saerfé's party.

Loren didn't want to think of what was going on in there now, but he had no doubt the goblins were still gathered. He couldn't see himself secretly slipping by. Which would mean having to fight off a small army of goblins with Lapis on his back.

"Let's hope there's an exit on the other side," he said.

"If there is one, Mr. Loren, I'd say you're incredibly lucky."

He hesitated to make a call on his own luck. Sure, the fact that he'd done nothing but fight his whole life yet had managed not to die could be considered lucky. Same went for the fact that he hadn't received any major, crippling injuries. That said, he considered the annihilation of his company to be quite an unfortunate event, and when he had to weigh it all up and see where he ended as a whole, he simply couldn't answer.

"For now, you'd better not put your hopes on my good fortune," he said.

"Only if you don't put your hopes on mine either."

For some reason, she didn't seem the least bit fazed by the warning. She even made it her own. He sent her another questioning glance.

"No, well, you see. When I left the country of demons, my parents made off with my eyes and my limbs and called it a restriction."

"Oh...that does sound unfortunate."

You had parents? Loren thought, mildly surprised. Come to think of it, demons didn't just grow on trees. It made sense that they had to be born to parents. It was, moreover, unarguably unfortunate that those very same parents had stolen Lapis's eyes and limbs, so much so that he had to wonder whether it was worse than what he'd endured when he lost his company.

"And when I slipped into human society as an adventurer, the party I ended up with was—well, you saw."

"All right, I get it. You had it bad, maybe worse than I did."

"Though they were all so terribly thoughtless and inattentive, it was quite a convenient crew for someone who wanted to hide her identity."

“Let’s just end it here. No need to go on.” If Loren let her keep landing combos, he’d have to admit she was the unluckiest creature in the known world. *I’m starting to see why demons get such a bad rap. It’s because you can say things like that without batting an eye.*

“To top it all off, you remember my eyes and limbs? My parents went and hid them somewhere in human territory. I just wanted to experience the world a bit, but now I can’t go home until I find them.”

“You trying to make this a contest or something? I’m not playing your game.”

“And if I *do* find my poor, lonely limbs, how am I supposed to reattach them?”

“Go home. Ask your parents. End of story.”

Loren couldn’t imagine what circumstances could lead a parent to steal their daughter’s limbs and hide them in some far-off land. Moreover, a thought process that simply wrote off that dismemberment and theft as tough luck was so incomprehensible that he doubted he would ever come to understand it.

“Um, Mr. Loren?”

He was dragged out of his thought spiral by the very person who had pushed him into it. He was wary as he returned his attention to Lapis. *Is she going to drop an even bigger bomb?*

Then he noticed her pointing in the direction he was running toward, and he refocused.

The cave continued on as the same consistent corridor, but what Lapis noticed lay quite a bit further down—a slight glimmer. Something in the distance glowed.

“No dead end, huh?” he asked.

“A dead end wouldn’t let off light, would it?”

“Cave wouldn’t either. You think we got more goblins down there?”

“I don’t know. But I don’t sense any.”

Loren didn’t know to what degree he could trust that assessment. However, demons supposedly possessed superior physical prowess, so maybe their

senses were slightly better as well. He slowed his speed, shifting to a quiet, stealthy gait.

Thanks to the light reaching out toward them, Loren recovered a certain degree of vision. “Snuff your light,” he whispered.

Lapis did so. Their surroundings dimmed until Loren could only vaguely make anything out.

“Can you stand yet?” he asked.

“I’m sorry, I don’t mean to be a burden.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

Lapis sounded ashamed, but Loren hadn’t gotten his hopes up, and thus, in his view, she had no reason to feel discouraged.

“I should apologize beforehand,” he said. “I might have to drop you for a bit in an emergency. Be ready.”

“I understand. You can’t draw your weapon with me on your back.”

The claustrophobic cave prevented him from using his greatsword to the best of his ability. However, he had no other weapons and would have to rely on it if it came to violence. In that case, Lapis would be in the way. As she couldn’t move properly, the drop wouldn’t be pretty. Easy to imagine, and unfortunate indeed.

“Let’s just hope I don’t have to draw,” he said, cautiously walking toward the light at the end of the tunnel.

Perhaps he had been a little too cautious—it took quite a bit of time to get there. But eventually, he reached the light source without any issue. Here, the passage finally hit a dead end, a wall with a crevice at the bottom just wide enough for a child to bend down and crawl through. The light came from the crevice.

Loren inspected it for a while and came to two conclusions. Firstly, it didn’t seem to lead outside, and secondly, his body wouldn’t fit through—though he didn’t know about Lapis.

“I might be able to *just* barely squeeze through it if I got down on my

stomach,” Lapis agreed, “but I can’t really move at the moment. Not to mention, I have my reservations about crawling into who knows where on my own.”

Won’t her hips get stuck? Loren wondered, but he mostly agreed with what she had to say. He also didn’t feel like forcing her though there incapacitated and alone.

“Guess I’ll have to break the wall around it.” He didn’t really have a choice. Not that he had the right tools to expand the crevice. Just his sword.

But the fact of a large crack meant the surrounding wall might have lost some structural integrity. Filling his chest with that grasping hope, Loren gently sat Lapis down against the side of the tunnel a short distance away. He drew his sword.

“This is gonna be loud. You keep watch; make sure we don’t attract anything.”

Lapis nodded. “Leave it to me.”

Loren took his greatsword in a firm reverse grip and lowered the tip into the wall nearest the crack. It took a few stabs of the nearly edgeless slab of metal to chisel out a few pebbles’ worth.

His weapon was sturdy, but it would suffer quite a bit of damage if he continued using it outside of its intended function. *I’ll need to get it reforged or buy a new one if we get out of here alive.*

The thought didn’t stop him.

“This looks like it will take a while,” Lapis sighed.

Though the wall had weakened, it was still stone. The slow work of digging away at it with a sword yielded hardly any visible progress. Lapis was right in that regard, but any time Loren spent answering was better spent digging. He stabbed the wall again.

Luckily for them, the sound of Loren widening the crevice didn’t draw the attention of any new monsters. Had something found them, he would have had to fight while protecting an immobile ally, a horrid shackle that he expected would lead to quite an unfortunate end.

“I guess we’re lucky the wall isn’t too hard,” Lapis said.

Years had weathered the stone, and if they hadn’t, it probably wouldn’t have broken at all. *It would’ve been way easier if I had the space to swing*, Loren thought bitterly.

It took a long time, but eventually, he widened the crevice to the point where he could barely crawl through. After patting the small stone fragments and shavings off his sword, he replaced it on his back.

“That should about do it.”

“Nice work. And while I commend you, I must ask if you would be so kind as to pull me through from the other side.”

Despite the length of time that had passed, Lapis’s limbs didn’t seem to have regained any movement. And it wasn’t as though he could sidle through with her on his back. As she said, Loren would have to make it to the other side first, then reach back and drag her after.

“You’re real trouble, you know that?”

“My apologies.”

“Don’t sweat it. In for a penny, as they say.”

Loren pressed himself against the floor, slowly setting off on a crawl to the beyond.

Passing through wasn’t much trouble at all. Loren needed to be almost completely flat, and the sword hanging on his back proved to be a slight hindrance. But something that minorly inconvenient didn’t register as a true problem.

The tricky part came when he had to squeeze an as yet largely immobile Lapis through.

They still had to be wary of potential goblin threat, especially if they took too long, and Loren anxiously watched her wriggle and writhe from torso to pelvis, crawling like an inchworm along the floor. Once she was close enough to reach, he grabbed her arms and pulled her the rest of the way through.

“Touch of luck for both of us,” Loren concluded, seeing no sign of their pursuers yet.

He was additionally relieved that the place they ended up seemed to be outside goblin territory. The ground proved that. Crawling over it had left them covered them with dirt and dust. In that regard, Lapis’s priest vestments had taken a somewhat larger hit than Loren’s, just given the coloring. However, had they been crawling across goblin territory, they would have been smeared with such indescribable filth and foul smells that dirt would have been the least of their worries.

“Sorry for all the trouble, Mr. Loren. You’ve been a huge help.”

“Forget about it. More importantly, what does this place look like to you? I want your opinion.”

Sitting on the floor, Lapis turned her eyes to the scene beyond the crack. It differed quite a bit from the dark caves, and while not bright enough to call dazzling, the light provided a fairly good field of vision.

The ceilings rose high, and the space was vast. And it could all be made out by the faint glow of the walls and floor. This couldn’t possibly be a natural cave.

Still unable to stand, Lapis wriggled her body up against the wall and studied it so closely and for so long Loren wondered if her face would stick that way. Once her concentration broke, she cried out in amazement. “Color me surprised. This is manamen.”

“What’s that?”

“A material most often found in ruins of the ancient kingdom. Its formula is unknown, but it automatically absorbs mana from the atmosphere and converts it into light.”

Loren knew of the ancient kingdom—a nation that had flourished in times long gone. With its advanced magic technology, it had conquered over half the world, making citizens of all the people of human, demihuman, beast, and even demon-kind living in the lands it took. At least, that was what legends had to say on the matter.

Magic had been so integral to their society that everyone with status or

power had been a magician. This meant a majority of the ruins found these days once belonged to those magicians. It was said that at their peak, the ancient kingdom's cities had floated through the sky.

All in all, the kingdom's technology far outstripped what people could now call upon. And yet, one day, the kingdom had fallen, just like that. The races they governed had separated, united, and separated again until their relationships settled into that of the current political landscape.

"If this is one of those ruins, won't this discovery net us a fortune?" Loren definitely knew these places were hard to come by. What's more, he had heard that items excavated from these ruins could go for more money than he'd ever seen in his life—more even than he could feasibly imagine.

"Only if the guild and the graverobbers haven't ravaged it yet."

"C'mon... At least let me dream."

"More importantly, Mr. Loren, could you chip away a bit of the wall? Sure, it's not bright, but we can still use it as a light source. Not to mention, it's pretty valuable as an object of research." Lapis's eyes gleamed with expectation.

"I already chipped away plenty," Loren grunted, motioning at the mound of rubble he'd had to break off from the other side. "Take your pick."

"Oh, you're right!" Without a care to the additional dirt getting on her clothes, Lapis squirmed like a worm all over again. Loren grabbed her by the back of her collar, scruffing her like a kitten, and plopped her down by the hole. He would have felt bad if her clothes were stained beyond repair. She gave him proper thanks and promptly flopped over to inspect the fragments littering the ground. There, she carefully selected several chunks of manamen and stuffed them into her pockets.

"You can keep doing what you're doing, but if these really are ruins of the ancient kingdom, aren't we in a rough spot?" As Loren understood it, such ruins often came hand in hand with traps, riddles, and guardians—installations meant to drive off intruders. The more important the site (before ruination), the more danger one could expect, and given what he knew of the legendary ancient kingdom, he hated to think of what dangers lurked in these halls.

“I don’t know about that,” Lapis replied doubtfully once she was satisfied with the weight in her pockets. “We lump them all together as ‘ruins,’ but it takes all sorts, you know?”

“What do you mean by that?” Loren inserted his hands under Lapis’s armpits in an attempt to get her on her feet. As he held her there, he could tell she would fall over if he relaxed his arms even a little. He sighed. *Her hands can pick up pebbles, but it looks like her legs aren’t back yet.*

“The genuinely dangerous ruins are probably just as dangerous as you’re imagining, but just as many are completely inconsequential.”

Still, Loren thought it risky to stay in the same place for too long. Having failed to stand Lapis up, Loren lifted her back onto his back. She remained rather passive, letting him do as he wished and clinging to him before continuing her explanation.

“Of the ancient ruins I know, the most pointless one found so far was a toilet.”

“Hah?”

“Multiple private stalls, immaculate air conditioning and lighting. Even the waste disposal and scent removal measures left nothing to be desired. Naturally, it had neither guardians nor traps. You’d be more surprised if it did.”

Well, you’d have to be a pretty far gone basket case to put traps in a toilet, thought Loren. *What would you even be trying to protect? No, wait.*

“Nah, I wouldn’t be surprised if one or two folks wanted to protect themselves while doing their business.”

“I never thought of it that way.”

“A man’s most vulnerable when he’s doing that or holding a woman. That’s when he can’t focus. Can’t think.”

“Sounds like something a mercenary would say... But I can’t imagine the magicians of the ancient kingdom shared quite your point of view.”

Loren disagreed, but he understood these two vulnerabilities had been drilled into his head. They were the moments a mercenary was most liable to be

stabbed in the back or picked off from afar with magic or arrows, and thus the moments where he needed to take the most precautions. To be fair, he didn't expect Lapis to understand.

"Anyway, I think you get the picture," she said. "It's not as if every ancient kingdom ruin is dangerous. In fact, I'd say the dangerous ones are in the minority."

What people now called ruins had originally simply been buildings used by the ancient kingdom's citizens. Most places had no need of deadly traps and so forth. Of course, that didn't apply to research facilities or treasure vaults, but it also made sense that such places were relatively rare.

"Then our first step's finding out what kind of ruins these are," Loren said.

"That sounds about right."

"Here's hoping it's not the dangerous type."

Loren made sure Lapis was stable before slowly starting on his way. He didn't know where he was going, granted. However, upon closer inspection, the vast space and high ceilings led him to believe the room was actually part of a tremendous corridor. *Then maybe following it will get us somewhere.*

Of course, that meant wandering aimlessly around potentially perilous ruins, but compared to returning to a goblin-stuffed cave, this route at least left him with reason to cross his fingers.

"I'll keep on my toes, but Lapis, you look out too."

"I'll do my best to detect magic and traps. And I'll be counting on you if an enemy shows up."

"Sure, as long as it's something this thing can deal with." Loren flicked the hilt of his greatsword.

In Loren's hands, a swing of its nonsensical mass imparted just as much force as its appearance suggested. That said, it really was just an iron slab with no special features. While it had great effect against enemies vulnerable to physical destruction, faced with foes to which this did not apply—spiritual and magical bodies, for instance—it was completely powerless.

That had been more than enough power on the battlefield of man. In unknown ruins belonging to the ancient kingdom, Loren wasn't so convinced of his usefulness.

"Worst-case scenario, we have to weigh returning to the goblin nest and forcing our way through."

"That sounds dreadful. Let's try to avoid it."

Loren had slain the goblin magician, but they had no guarantee there was only one such magician to be found here. Additionally, they had both seen several larger individuals in the goblin troop that flanked their party from the entrance—presumably hobgoblins, according to Lapis, another variety of evolved form. These hobgoblins were formidable foes, incomparably stronger than standard goblins.

"I'm not sure whether you could cut through so many of them alone," Lapis said. "Especially since I still can't move myself."

She said it lightly enough, but Loren heard her grim implication: that she was, as yet, still dead weight.

"Best-case scenario, we get out without meeting anyone else," he said.

"I doubt my karma's good enough for things to work out so nicely."

"Same here. Even worse, I've got no kind of faith, so I can't even beg for salvation."

Even if Lapis was unluckier, Loren probably had far more bad karma. He smiled bitterly, until suddenly he stopped. He brought his right hand up to his shoulder. He meant to draw his sword. Lapis stiffened, bracing herself for the tumble.

However, Loren remained frozen, his hand on the hilt, not drawing. He lowered his stance, readying himself to move at the slightest provocation, as he glared down the corridor.

"Mr. Loren?"

"Quiet. Something's coming."

A considerable way down, the path turned a corner. Lapis didn't seem to, but

Loren *felt* something around the bend. That wouldn't worry him anywhere else, but in these ruins, it was hard to imagine their lives weren't about to be threatened.

"Should we run?" she proposed.

"Will it let us?"

They could always retreat. However, given they had absolutely no information about their current location, Loren was more strongly compelled to learn something than flee sight unseen. He would surely figure something out with just a glimpse of whatever was coming. *I can decide whether to run or stand my ground once we get that.*

His intentions made it through to Lapis. "I think I can use magic to stall it. Tell me when," she whispered into his ear.

Just as he nodded to her, the presence rounded the corner. Loren tensed his legs, ready for whatever came his way. And come out it did; it took one good look at him.

"Hey, look what I found. It's a scary-faced mister with a missus on his back!" it shouted.

"Huh?! What's something like that doing in unexplored ruins? An illusion trap?"

"Well, they're here, so what do you want me to do about it?! Ugh, you'd think an illusion would look better off!"

"Humankind. Probably. He's giving off body heat, to say the least."

"This is a bit too far out of the way to be lost, wouldn't you say?"

What appeared from beyond the corner and stopped before them was a quibbling, armed adventurer party. The IDs dangling from their necks reflected a silver hue.

"You were being chased by goblins and just so happened to wander into this place? That's some tough luck you got there, mister."

This adventurer, a young man with a thievish flair, laughed heartily. His stubble hinted he was perhaps a little older than Loren. Additionally, he showed no reservation whatsoever as he slicked back his short, scraggly brown hair and laughed right in Loren's face.

"They survived a party wipe, right? I don't think their luck's all that bad," chimed in a warrior called Ritz, who had introduced himself as the party's leader.

He wore standard warrior's garb: leather armor reinforced with metal plating, along with a buckler and a longsword. They all looked old and well-used but properly maintained—perhaps the term well-seasoned was more appropriate.

The thief Ritz scoffed and turned away. Evidently, his fun had been ruined. However, the woman standing beside him—she held a bow and dressed like a hunter—pulled his ear to get his head looking straight again.

"Chuck, don't be hateful."

"Hey, that hurts! Goddammit, Nym! Quit tugging! What are you gonna do if it comes off?!"

"Ears that don't listen are pointless."

So the thief was called Chuck while the hunter was Nym. She had long blonde hair that hung artlessly and untended. Her blue eyes were stuck angrily half-open, while the ears peeking out of her hair were long and sharp, like daggers. Loren had heard of such ears but never seen the real thing. His eyes naturally gravitated toward them.

"Is this your first time seeing an elf?" asked the elderly magician who had introduced himself as Koltz. His pure-white hair was knotted at the back of his head, and he held an unornamented black staff and wore a gray robe.

All four of them were silver-rank adventurers. Silver was one up from iron and two up from copper, which was what Loren had freshly registered as. These folks could proudly call themselves veterans.



“Yeah, sorry about that,” Loren said. “Sure, it’s a first, but that was rude of me.”

He didn’t mean to stare, and perhaps he had come off poorly. Much to his surprise, Koltz jovially waved off his apology.

“I can’t blame you for looking. She is a beauty, despite everything.”

“Koltz, if you want to keep your eyes in their sockets, you will keep your tongue in your mouth,” warned Nym.

Loren thought it an empty threat until she pulled a dagger from her waist. He flinched.

“I don’t have many years left, but I wouldn’t want to go through them blind,” Koltz said.

“No need to worry. I’ll be satisfied with just one of them.”

“Hey, you lot, quit screwing around in front of our guests. You’re making them feel unwelcome.”

The two went silent the moment Ritz spoke, and he turned back to Loren.

“If we had the time, I wouldn’t mind escorting you to the exit. But sorry to say, we’re on the clock. Can’t get too sidetracked. We’re competing with another party, see?”

“Expedition of the ruins found near Ain. Have you heard?” Nym asked. She really didn’t inflect much, did she?

Loren did recall Saerfé’s party discussing some ruins before they’d taken on their illfated quest. The better job Narron had wanted, the one they were unqualified for. So he and Lapis had found themselves in those newly discovered ruins after all.

“It’s hard to estimate the danger level of newfound ruins, but they’re usually pretty worth it if you wanna get rich quick. We took the quest first opportunity we got, only to learn someone else already had their finger in the pie,” Chuck said, sounding quite irritated.

“We’re currently up against some tough competition,” said Koltz. “See who

can perform a more effective investigation and all that. Our pay depends on our results, so we're in a bit of a hurry."

The implication was that they wouldn't be able to help Loren and Lapis. Loren understood and more than accepted it. There were hardly any goody-two-shoes mercenaries out there who would help someone they hardly knew, and without compensation to boot. That probably held true for adventurers as well.

Perhaps it would be different if payment could be made. Not that it mattered. Loren had not a penny to his name.

"I get it," he said. "We don't plan on getting between you and work. Just point us toward the direction of the exit. We'll manage from there."

Traveling with a party would have been their best option, given Lapis's condition. However, these guys were on the job. Loren would rather die than beg working professionals to drop their obligations to guide him out. And anyway, it wasn't as if he was completely helpless here.

As such, a direction would do. He expected these veterans had secured an escape route. They'd just have to worry about traps, but Lapis would take care of that, and Loren would remain at the ready to face any combat.

"Yeah, about that," Ritz said hesitantly.

Loren's mood plummeted. Did they want compensation for the information? Probably. Hardly anything in the world came free of charge. If that was the case, he'd have to rely on Lapis to cough up the coin.

"Honestly, we don't know either," said Ritz.

"Now that's tough luck," Loren replied, unthinking. He could barely comprehend what he was hearing. Weren't these people veterans? Where had all their prep work gone?

"Look, don't misunderstand, okay?" Ritz said frantically. "It's not like we had a serious mental lapse or we didn't make a map. It's nothing like that."

Oh great, did I let that skepticism show? To a stranger? Downright rude of me, Loren thought.

However, Ritz's panicked look was a bit off. He wasn't staring directly at

Loren, but rather a little to the side.

“Lapis,” Loren warned.

“My apologies. Is there something on my face?”

“Didn’t your legs give out or something? That’s not the look of a gal who needs her comrade to carry her.”

Lapis flopped back down, properly scolded.

What face would Ritz make if he learned her true identity? Loren wondered. More importantly: “So what happened that made you lose your way?”

“We fell. Hit a pitfall trap and went down, just like that. Chuck over there failed to spot it.” Ritz glared at Chuck and clicked his tongue. The man in question hid behind Koltz, only to be kicked out into the open by Nym.

Loren did feel slight pity for the thief—his party didn’t seem any happier than Loren—but he urged Ritz to share the rest of the story.

“Lucky for us, there was no poison or spikes at the bottom, but we dropped down a whole floor and it was too high to climb back up. We’re looking for a usable way out,” Ritz explained darkly.

Loren looked up at the ceiling. It was high enough to give him plenty of space to swing his massive sword—rather, it was so high he couldn’t imagine how he would possibly reach it. He could definitely see how hard it would be to scale without proper gear.

“If we had left someone up top, sure, they could have pulled us back up. But we all fell, the lot of us.”

“Chuck fell on top of me. One day, he’ll die for that.”

“Might as well have hit the ground, if you know what I’m saying.”

Chuck’s retort drew all eyes to a certain point on Nym’s body. Upon noticing that, she drew her bow and took aim.

“Last words, out with them.”

Loren didn’t have a death wish. He skillfully looked elsewhere.

Lapis, on the other hand, wasn’t so deft. She silently pressed her face into

Loren's back and minute tremors of her swallowed laughter tickled his spine.

On a side note, hers, while modest, were pronounced enough to assert their presence, and thus beyond comparison to Nym's.

"I'll start with Chuck."

"Don't take it out on me just because I'm right!"

"Anyway, you heard how it is," Ritz tiredly cut in. He made sure to face only Loren, blocking off the sight of Nym chasing Chuck down with her bow. "As much as I'd love to help you, our directions won't get you to the exit."

"Understandable."

Life took its toll. Even a silver-rank adventurer could fall for a trap. It was more surprising to Loren that after falling from that high ceiling, not a single one of their party members had any conspicuous wounds. Even Nym, who Chuck had landed on, didn't look hurt. Possibly she was hiding it.

"We got pretty banged up coming down," Ritz confirmed, "though we managed somehow or another with potions. So, while we're on that subject—"

"If you're curious about my blessings, I have one use of healing left." Lapis lifted her head and butted in before Ritz could even finish.

Loren didn't quite catch her meaning, but he noticed Ritz was momentarily taken by surprise—though he quickly regained his composure.

"Only one, eh?"

"I guarantee it will do you better than a potion. I believe I'll be able to manage another if you give me a few hours."

Loren glanced inquisitively at her, and Lapis whispered in his ear. "They want me to tag along to make up for the potions they wasted. Probably."

Ingesting a potion did speed up recovery to a degree. Unfortunately, its effects were neither remarkable nor swift. Compared to that, a heal blessing worked instantly; what's more, it did a far better job than any medicine.

"Does that mean he's gonna get rid of me and take you along?"

"Well, I, for one, can't move. He's going to need someone to carry me, right?"

Lapis said more clearly, and she soon proved she had put some thought into it. “Their combat capability falls if one of their party members needs to haul me around. However, Mr. Loren, if you stay, you’ll have some protection, and we won’t compromise their party’s ability to fight. We all have a vested interest in teamwork. Worst case, even if they do toss us aside when we’re no longer of no use to them, it’ll be no skin off our backs.”

“Do I really look so heartless?” Ritz asked.

The question made Loren and Lapis exchange a look. They replied at nearly the same time: “Pretty much.”

“I get that I look rough around the edges, but come on...”

“No need to worry. If he said to steal the woman and leave the man behind, I would end him here,” Nym stated matter-of-factly, eliciting a wry smile from the rest of her party. It gave the impression that these exchanges were an everyday occurrence to them.

Loren found himself smiling too, despite himself, and Ritz presented his offer. “What we’re asking for is one use of the lady’s blessing at our command. In exchange, we’ll permit you to accompany us until we exit the ruins. What do you say?”

“Very well. It is a pleasure doing business with you,” Lapis accepted before Loren could get a word in.

You all right with that? Ritz’s eyes seemed to say as he glanced at Loren, but the way Loren saw it, the conditions of the bargain mainly had to do with Lapis. He didn’t think he had the right to choose for her, and as long as she accepted, he had no intention to dispute it.

“Now that that’s settled, it looks like we’re stuck together. Well, until we get out, at least,” Ritz said, holding out his left hand.

Loren looked down at it. He plastered the most affable smile he could manage on his face, gripped it back, and shook.

The party now consisted of six members, albeit only five with free range of

movement.

Ritz and Chuck proceeded at the lead. Koltz the magician took center, while Nym the hunter and Lapis-laden Loren took the rearguard. As Loren essentially couldn't use his hands, he couldn't help feeling their rear was too vulnerable.

"Don't worry. Trust me." Nym patted his shoulder to reassure him.

That roasted shoulder was now wrapped in bandages. The treatment administered had been more of a stopgap measure than anything, but it had at the very least been slathered with a bit of medicine. Loren had been too worried about pursuit to treat it before, but it had concerned their new party. While they hadn't offered a potion, they provided disinfectant, an ointment for burns, and bandages.

Thankfully, he was a little better off now. But the wound still stung on contact, not that he let it show. He endured Nym's pats with a somewhat stiff smile.

"If it gets too painful, please tell me," Lapis whispered in his ear.

She was supposed to be able to use two blessings a day. However, she had told Ritz she only had one left. True, Lapis had quite a lot to expend her energy on, what with her valiant attempts to move her limbs. But the reigning theory held that the mana used in magic and the power of faith used in blessings came from different reserves. In short, Lapis had neglected to report one of her uses, one which she intended to preserve. She was apparently considering using it to treat Loren.

"I'm fine," he said. "I've been taken care of."

To be perfectly honest, Loren was pretty lukewarm on the idea of lying in negotiations. It was a separate issue if you were dealing with someone unsavory, but as long as you had reason to trust in the folks across the table, he believed both parties should be honest and upfront.

Of course, he still didn't know if Ritz's party deserved their trust, and that prevented him from chastising Lapis for her decision.

"You know, I can't help but feel there's something off about this place," Chuck said from the lead, cautiously glancing around.

Loren always wanted as much information as he could get. He simply couldn't let the intel of a higher-ranking adventurer slip by, and he strained his ears to pick up Chuck's pondering.

"When you hear about supposedly unexplored ruins, you expect, you know, golems, or undead, or something not living, right?"

Chuck turned ever so slightly toward Loren. He probably wanted some sort of reaction, but Loren didn't have the right experience to draw on. The failed goblin hunt had been his first experience as an adventurer. And his company had never been paid to delve into ruins.

While he mulled over how to respond, Chuck seemed unbothered. He continued on regardless. "Not a single one of 'em in here, is the thing."

"You mean you haven't encountered any enemies? That not a good thing?"

Loren didn't know how untouched this place really was, but if it *was* from the era of the ancient kingdom, it had been abandoned for hundreds of years. That wasn't a livable timeframe any being who breathed. As long as nothing outside had broken in, all they'd find would be the lifeless creatures Chuck mentioned. The absence of these made Loren want to assume they simply didn't have any enemies to worry about, but Chuck frowned, turning his eyes ahead.

"That's the thing. I don't know why, but all we run into is goblins."

"Goblins in an ancient ruin? Did they sneak in from somewhere?"

They tended to do that kind of thing. You'd find goblins crawling into any kind of crevice to gather en masse and breed. The tenacious little monsters sometimes even settled in untreated sewers of large cities. It stood to reason that if they'd found a way into a secluded place like this, there'd be a lot of them.

Chuck shook his head, his eyes grimly forward. "About that. These ruins were sealed up to the moment they were discovered—and the guys who found it had to hire magicians to break in. Meaning, the goblins couldn't have come in through the front door."

"Yeah, but we got in through that crack—they could've done the same."

“Right, now you’re getting it. Encountering you guys made me realize these ruins have holes. Probably explains the goblins.”

“But it doesn’t explain everything,” Koltz broke in. “If the goblins just got in from the outside and started multiplying here, that still wouldn’t account for the lack of other guardians.”

“You don’t reckon whatever was protecting the place just wasted away or something?”

“If that were the case, they would leave some wreckage or remains. Maybe not if they were ghost-type undead, but that would require a particular sort of ruin.”

“Undead are already unsuited to serve as guardians, generally speaking,” Koltz explained. “The vestige of their original sentience renders it difficult to imprint complex orders upon them. In most cases, this means stationing countless low-grade undead who can only take simple orders, or placing the ruins under the command of a single powerful undead who can control the rest. In either case, it’s difficult to imagine they would vanish without a trace. Yet we’ve found no sign of anything but goblins.”

“Well, I personally hope that they just got in from that crack,” said Ritz. “We only saw goblins after the pitfall. If they’re coming through that crevice you two found, that’s our way out.”

“Well, if the place is riddled with such holes, there’s a chance those goblins are coming in from multiple.”

“Don’t wanna imagine that,” Loren muttered.

Multiple goblin hordes were the last thing he wanted. Perhaps they’d mean little to a silver-rank party, but Loren had just seen his own party annihilated by a simple goblin hunt, and he would rather not repeat the experience.

“Hold up, more goblins ahead.”

Partway down an unobstructed corridor, Ritz raised a warning. Loren was about to lower Lapis, but Nym stopped him. “No trouble. Loren, watch our back.”

“Got it.”

His hands were occupied, but he could still watch for enemies approaching from behind. As he promptly turned around, Nym swiftly nocked an arrow and unleashed it with offhanded ease and hardly any sign of taking aim. Her arrow sailed over the heads of the two vanguards and stuck in the eye of the goblin leading the pack, killing it instantly.

“Only seven. Not too many.”

“You don’t need magic for this, do you?” asked Koltz.

“No need,” Ritz confirmed. “It’ll be over before you know it.”

He readied his shield and sword and charged alone into the party of goblins rushing at them. His shield knocked the first one down, and a flash of his sword swiftly sent the second one’s head flying. He then closed in on the one he’d bashed out of formation and tore through its neck before it could stand.

In the time it took Ritz to do that, Nym’s arrows took out a second, then a third. Just like that, and in the blink of an eye, seven goblins were dead without the chance to resist.

“You’re incredible,” Loren called over to Ritz, rather impressed.

However, Ritz replied indifferently. “That’s nothing special. We’re silver, you know?” No sense of pride or accomplishment.

Maybe perfectly normal fighting just looks incredible after I saw how Saerfé’s party handled things, Loren thought.

“If four silvers had trouble with seven goblins, we’d be thrown out on the streets,” Ritz continued as if he had already lived this a thousand times before.

Now that he put it like that, Loren winced. *On the contrary, that might have been rude of me.*

“Didn’t mean anything by it,” he apologized.

“It’s fine. This should be a good lesson for a copper like you,” Ritz said as he got to work cutting an ear off each of the decapitated and arrow-stuck corpses.

Loren observed, wondering what exactly he was doing. Ritz stowed seven ears

in a small cloth sack and held it out. This offering, of course, seemed quite useless to Loren, but there must have been some meaning to it. He looked back at Ritz.

“You came on a goblin hunt, right?” Ritz said, a little more bluntly and rapidly than usual. “Sure, you failed in the nest, but defeat any goblin, and you’ll still get paid. That’s less than pocket change to us. But you need it.”

Ah, so the proof he needed of a goblin kill was its ear. Loren didn’t love that he was only learning this now, but he took it to heart.

“You sure about that?” he asked. He hadn’t properly checked how much he would get for these ears, but Ritz handing them over was practically the same as giving Loren free money.

“You don’t need it? Then toss ’em. The reward for one goblin is five copper, if even. It’s not worth the extra trouble to carry with us.”

“Feel free to take them,” Nym chimed in, “It’s rare to see our stingy leader concede so much as a penny. You can brag to your friends.”

“Shut up. You’re supposed to show a bit of consideration for your juniors in the business.”

“What a surprise. Will pigs fly tomorrow?”

Nym had been largely expressionless up to that point, so the blatant surprise now crossing her face told Loren that Ritz had done something considerably out of character.

Ritz ultimately tossed the bag at Loren and nagged Nym in turn.

“Why not take it? We might as well accept their generosity,” Lapis said.

Without a reason to refuse, Loren hung the bag on his belt.

Chapter 4:

An Exploration to an Escape

THE EXPEDITION PRESSED ON without issue. Just as Chuck said, the only monsters they encountered were goblins, which Ritz's party immediately dispatched. They took just the ears and left the bodies behind.

Loren worried that the goblins might turn undead, but there was no place to bury the bodies in the ruins, and they had neither the fuel nor the proper ventilation to burn them.

"Even if they go undead, they're just goblins. They won't be too much of a hassle," Ritz said. Though from Loren's point of view, goblin ghosts and zombies sounded like more trouble than they were worth.

All that aside, thanks to the wave of goblins being defeated no sooner than they had appeared, Loren's sack of severed ears swelled near to bursting. It wasn't much of an issue at the beginning, but after a certain point, the cloth oozed with goblin blood, and its scent grew foul. While Loren very much wanted to throw it away, he couldn't possibly discard what Ritz's party had so generously conceded to him; what's more, these disgusting bits could be converted into cash as soon as they got back, so he couldn't treat them roughly.

At one point, he glanced around, wondering if the smell bothered anyone else. However, it was like the scent didn't even register to Ritz's party. Only Lapis—still clinging to his back—scrunched her nose, and as she did her best not to inhale through it, he heard her panting through her mouth.

"Let me make this clear," she scowled, "I am *not* unduly excited by blood. In fact, my nose has pretty much given up the ghost."

"You didn't have to spell it out." The thought hadn't even crossed his mind.

Nym watched this exchange with a smile when all of a sudden, her eyes turned grim. "Hold on. The air is strange," she called out.

The rest reacted quickly. Ritz readied his weapon and shield while Chuck

scanned the area. Koltz brandished his staff, ready to use it at any moment.

“What is it, Nym?”

“The smell changed. Blood. Not goblin.”

Loren took a sniff, but all he could pick up was the stench wafting off the sack at his waist. He didn’t detect whatever Nym had. In fact, the goblin stench rendered him unable to smell anything else. Amazingly enough, Nym stood quite nearby and should have been in essentially the same state.

“In the first place, both human and goblin blood smell like rusted iron. Are they really that different?” asked Lapis, sounding rather fed up. It wasn’t as if Loren didn’t get where she was coming from.

“I won’t tell you guys to hold your tongues, but I suggest you keep an eye out. Nym’s senses are the real deal. Her nose, eyes, and ears are sharper than any of ours.”

“It’s the only part of her that’s devel—ow!”

Nym silently delivered a kick to the back of a certain thief who had said a little too much. Chuck looked like he had the physical edge on Nym, but she had put a lot of power into that kick and he was thrown to the floor.

“Quit fooling around. You’re setting a bad example again,” Ritz sighed.

“Now, now, I just thought we were getting too tense, eh? Relax or we’ll lose our minds.” Chuck snorted, rubbing his back, but he kept his eyes alert. “From what I can tell, there’s no one near. They’ve gotta be further down.”

“Fine. Let’s go,” Ritz ordered. It seemed he had determined it was useless to waste his time on someone so unrepentant.

Their march slowed considerably. However, Loren far preferred that over rushing ahead and succumbing to whatever Nym had sensed. No one else objected either.

“Can your missy move yet?” Ritz asked Loren as they crept forward.

Don’t ask me. Loren glanced back.

Lapis slowly lifted and lowered her arms. Then she shook her head. “I’m sorry.

It will take a little longer.”

“It’s your legs that gave out, right? What’ve your arms got to do with it?”

“My body locked up with fear, I’m afraid. My legs utterly gave out... I know it’s pathetic.”

Ritz heard out her excuses with a tired look and he turned to Loren. “I don’t know where you met her, but it’ll be better for the both of you if you drop her back at the church.”

“That’s up to her. It’s none of my business.” In any case, Loren wasn’t in any position to decide Lapis’s course of action. He hardly even knew her—though he didn’t plan on explaining any of this to Ritz.

Loren didn’t consider himself good with words, and there was always a chance he would end up saying something he shouldn’t. While he himself didn’t think much about Lapis’s identity, others might not take too kindly to her heritage. He couldn’t predict how Ritz’s party would take the revelation that they were traveling with a demon. His conclusion: *I should keep it on the down low, and if I want to do that, I should keep my words to a minimum.*

Chuck raised his voice. “Hey, take a look at that.”

Loren followed the thief’s pointing to a fallen form quite a bit further down the passage. He couldn’t tell what it was at first; at this distance, he could just barely make out something was there at all.

But, either due to her role as a hunter or her abilities as an elf, Nym muttered, strained: “Armor...covered in blood.”

Their wariness didn’t falter here. While they wanted to hurry and investigate that very instant, they had to expect traps, particularly those that might have led to that lump of bloodstained armor. They took their time, making sure nothing was about to descend upon them, and slowly approached the remains as a party.

Ritz stooped down to get a closer look. “It’s armor, all right. Leather. But I can’t tell anything else about it.”

In other words, it was exactly what Nym had said it was, nothing more and

nothing less. It had been destroyed to the point where it was difficult to confirm it had in fact once been leather armor, and no traces of its former owner remained.

“One thing’s for certain, though. Its owner is dead as a doornail.”

The amount of blood splattered across the armor made it pretty clear the owner had sustained a lethal blow. It wasn’t only on the armor either; a rust-red stain spread out over the floor below. Even if the strike hadn’t killed them immediately, no human could survive losing that much blood.

“I’m pretty sure our competition is the only other group of people in these ruins. Did they fall into this place too?”

“I’m trying to remember. Which one of them wore leather armor again?”

With Koltz’s prompting, Ritz and Chuck crossed their arms at practically the same time and fell into thought.

Looks like their competition didn’t leave a strong impression on them, thought Loren.

Beside him, Nym looked at the struggling men of her party with cold eyes. “Ritz and Chuck are too careless. Koltz is going senile.”

“Am not!” the old man cried.

“Then remember already. Who was wearing the leather armor?”

“Grr.” Despite Koltz’s groans, it wasn’t so easy to drag back what was forgotten.

“Admit you’re going senile and give up.”

“I am not senile! Not on my life. Just you wait, I’ll remember soon enough.”

Koltz had grit his teeth, straining his mind to its limits. The others—Ritz and Chuck—had reached the groaning stage. Nym rolled her eyes and turned to Loren.

“I want your opinion.”

“Mine? Not your friends’?”

“Let them think it over. They might remember eventually.”

And you're all right with that? Loren thought.

Nym, meanwhile, passed on what she knew. "If we assume this leather armor belonged to the party competing with us, the one wearing it was the thief."

"That sounds about right."

"But that's not the problem. I want your opinion on the other part."

Magicians generally didn't wear armor, instead opting for cloth equipment like robes. Priests were a similar case, though they might wear chainmail under their vestments for added precaution. Thieves and warriors, meanwhile, focused on defense and mobility. The scraps of leather had no signs of riveting or reinforcements—a lighter variant, then, which led Loren to agree it had been owned by a thief. Loren hadn't met the competing party, but it was easy enough to deduce that.

Nym went on. "Say our assumptions are correct. Their thief was a woman."

"Yeah?" Loren said. *What about it?*

But Lapis seemed to pick up on the problem Nym implied. "Ah, and thus far, you've only seen goblins in these ruins."

"You say that like you think there *is* something else."

"Well, a goblin generally won't kill a woman—not immediately," said Lapis. "They have their own uses for them. But if the owner of this armor was a woman, that person was killed here without a second thought. Isn't that strange?"

Loren took another look at the wreckage littering the floor. With how violently it had been destroyed, he couldn't tell whether it had been worn by a woman or not. However, if it had been worn by the woman Nym identified, then Lapis was right. Something felt off about her sudden death.

"She could've been killed by accident," he said. "A lucky shot, maybe."

"I won't deny the possibility. But there's so much blood."

He agreed with Lapis there too. Given a goblin's crude weapons and mediocre strength, even if they struck a vital organ by chance, the wound wouldn't be deep enough to produce this bloody mess.

“Given the amount of blood, we should assume she was dismembered right here,” Loren muttered.

“And that goes completely counter to standard goblin behavior. So long as their female target still breathes, they prioritize dragging them back to the nest whole.”

“Then something else is in here.”

“So it seems.” Nym took a moment of silence to get her thoughts in order before turning again to Loren. “Do you remember the way through the nest beyond the crack?”

“I do. It was pretty much a straight path.”

“I see. Ritz.” Nym called over to her leader, who had given up on remembering the other party’s faces. She waited until all eyes were on her before she made her proposal. “Something is strange. We might want to leave and re-strategize.”

“Hold on, I feel something off too, but there’s no guarantee this armor belonged to those guys,” said Ritz. “If we want to retreat, we’ll need a stronger reason to justify it.”

“Our reputation’ll take a hit if we leave just because we ran into bloody armor,” Chuck said. “If we got an ID tag, on the other hand...”

Nym scanned the floor, but she couldn’t spot anything that fit the bill.

Ritz sighed and frowned. “We’ll redouble our precautions. But we can’t turn back yet. Otherwise, we risk losing work after this.”

“If that’s your decision, I’ll go along with it. But, Ritz...”

“I know. We’ll aim to find an ID, and the second we do, we can go.”

“Understood.” Having been given conditions under which they would confirm the dangers Nym outlined, she was satisfied.

Ritz made sure there were no other objections before declaring: “Now that’s settled, we’re moving on. Keep on your toes.”

Whether he agreed or not, at the moment, Loren had no choice other than to

follow the party. He silently nodded.

When it rains, it pours, they often say, but it seemed Loren had reached a break in the storm. A short while after they spotted the tattered leather armor, Lapis lightly tapped him on the shoulder. She chose the uninjured one, and the ease with which she moved her hands made her message clear.

“Are you fine now?”

“I believe so. I’m sorry for all the trouble.”

Loren made sure Lapis nodded confirmation before gently lowering her from his back. Once she was down, she tried stomping her feet a few times before taking a large stretch and nodding again.

“Hey, missy, you back up?” Ritz said with a grin, but he didn’t sound critical, and Lapis didn’t seem to mind.

“Yes. It was so comfortable up on Mr. Loren’s back that I would have liked to stay longer, but I know I shouldn’t get in the way.”

“Wait, are you two like that?”

Loren opened his mouth to object, but Lapis covered it. His eyes widened. What could she could be up to now?

“It’s still a work in progress,” she said—which was completely outrageous!

“Nice going. You managed to nab yourself quite a pretty gem there, mister,” Chuck crowed. What was he so happy about?!

As Chuck cheered, Nym calmly kicked him in the back. “If you want to draw monsters, do it alone.”

“I’m pretty sure you’ll end me before any monster can,” he groaned.

“I’ll have to agree with him there,” said Koltz.

The kick had looked merciless enough, but the damage dealt proved surprisingly light. Chuck was up on his feet in no time, rubbing his back.

“You can participate in combat now, right?” Ritz asked, and Loren nodded.

It wasn't as if he couldn't have taken part in battle before, but as he would have had to lower Lapis whenever he wanted to draw the sword on his back, it had been difficult to join in at the drop of a hat. Naturally, he would have dropped her in an emergency, but he did feel some reluctance toward being so careless with someone who couldn't move.

"Then I'm counting on you to watch our backs. Missy, you help him out."

"Leave it to us."

They were truly a six-person party now. The formation changed to put Ritz and Chuck at the vanguard, Nym and Koltz in the center, and Loren and Lapis heading up the rear.

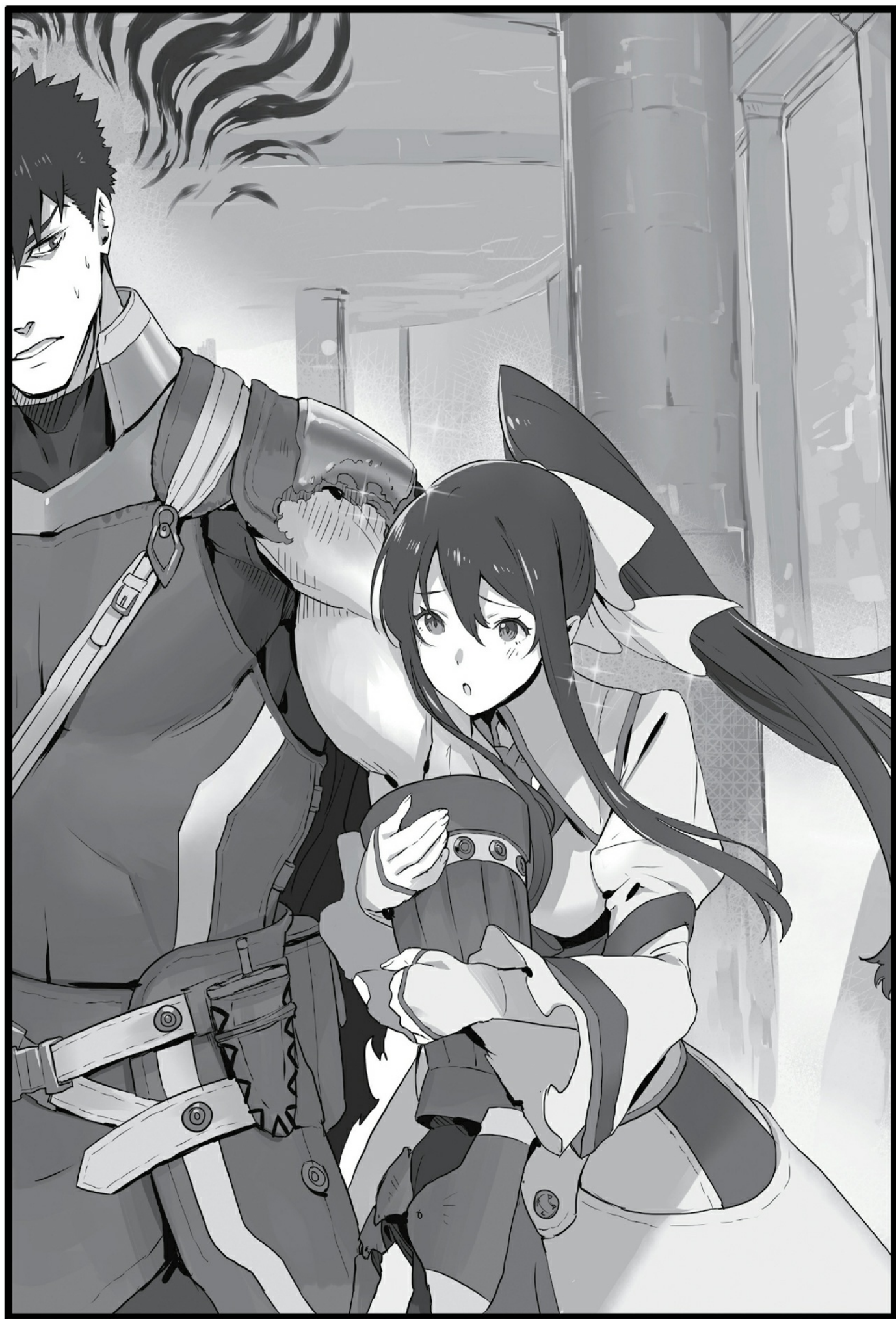
"You don't get to experience this often, Mr. Loren," Lapis whispered. "Not only are we in an ancient kingdom ruin, it's an unidentified one at that. And we're accompanying the initial exploration. You'd never usually get to go on a job like this at copper rank."

In Loren's opinion, for a girl whose legs had just recovered, Lapis was in exceedingly high spirits. The party competing with Ritz's—presumably a silver as well—had likely suffered heavy casualties. That in itself made Loren anxious, as did the age of these ruins and the mysteries they contained. He didn't see a single reason to be optimistic. Lapis's exuberance felt completely out of place.

Maybe that's another reason folks don't get on with demons. He prodded the bouncing girl with his elbow and spoke, voice low. "Do you even remember the situation we're in?"

For a moment, Lapis seemed completely lost. She tilted her head at Loren, thought for a while, then abruptly hugged his left arm. "Oh, Mr. Loren. I'm so scared." Her voice trembled.

"How are you so bad at acting?"



Luckily, as the party had entrusted them with the back line, they didn't draw attention whispering to one another. That said, Loren wanted to do something about Lapis's reactions. If she kept this up, they'd arouse suspicions. With that in mind, he tried imagining what reactions would be more appropriate and, unfortunately, drew a blank. If Lapis acted scared, for example, she would be in the way. Yet he still got the feeling something was off about her current attitude—she brimmed with curiosity, showing not even an inkling of fear.

"I get that your interest's been piqued, but keep it in check, would you?"

"If you insist." Lapis didn't look the least bit convinced, but she released his arm and nodded. "Incidentally, what exactly do you consider our current objective again?"

Nym faithfully answered. "Fundamentally, we intend to continue our exploration. However, we'd now also like to establish the whereabouts of our competing party. We do not presently have enough information to determine which takes priority."

"I see," Lapis replied. "Then I suggest returning to the pitfall you all fell from."

The sudden declaration earned Ritz's interest. "Let's hear your reasoning, missy."

"I presume the pitfall was a trap to intercept intruders," said Lapis.

"Well, yeah. Of course it was." Chuck's tone said he thought this so obvious it didn't need stating.

Lapis paid no mind to this. "Yes, and the fact that the trap wasn't lethal suggests this entire floor was built to hold any such intruders."

This seemed far from obvious, but Lapis said it so offhandedly that she perhaps thought it was.

"You mean like the monsters on this floor are only here to sic on the fools who fell? Why would they go outta their way to do that?"

"I don't yet know the specifics, but no matter the era, no matter the country, it's often the case that unlawful entrants lack any manner of legal protection. Hence, they may be treated howsoever one desires to treat them. You must

understand where I'm going with this by now."

They did, which was why they all had such unpleasant looks on their faces. Lapis was implying that whoever had designed this place had a use for those who were wounded by the initial fall from the trap above, or who were killed by monsters roaming the floor. What those uses might be, no one could say, but everyone sensed they were anything but decent.

"Let's put all those musings on the shelf for now. What I want to say is that there is no possible way the creators of this facility would put anything of import on *this* floor. Hence, searching here is largely pointless if your goal is to investigate the ruins as a whole."

"So why should we return to the pitfall?"

"There will probably be a passageway nearby, built in order to maintain the trap. Or perhaps to collect the hole's unlucky victims. Either way, I believe we will find a way up."

Ritz considered Lapis's proposal. "There's some worth in what you're saying. Especially when we don't have any other ideas."

While Nym voiced her agreement, Chuck took up the role of devil's advocate.

"Hold up. We didn't see anything like a passageway around."

"Since the fall isn't designed to be lethal, they couldn't make the path up too obvious," said Lapis. "I presume it is hidden."

"I didn't notice it."

"Well, you're Chuck..." Ritz muttered. Nym and Koltz nodded along.

Lapis at least seemed to understand she shouldn't pile on, given that she put on a troubled smile. Wanting to avoid any unnecessary trouble, Loren looked away, expressionless.

"Dammit, how am I supposed to argue with that?" Chuck sighed.

"Then it's settled," said Ritz. "We'll return for now and investigate the area around where we fell."

Once their leader gave his verdict, the party moved fast. They were just

retracing their steps, but they apparently remembered each fork well. Additionally, thanks to the map Koltz had kept, they managed to reach their destination with no issue whatsoever.

“Is there seriously a way up around here?” Koltz muttered.

The pitfall deposited its victims in the middle of a long, unremarkable corridor. They saw no hint of the hidden passage Lapis hypothesized would be there. When Loren squinted up, he could make out a discolored portion of the ceiling—presumably the cover of the pitfall—but it had already resealed. Not to mention, the ceiling was too high to reach without tools.

“Normally, I’d say shut up and look for it, but I’m starting to have my doubts,” said Ritz.

“No matter what you think of me, I’m still a silver-rank thief, you know? Of course I’d be able to spot a hidden—”

A shifting sound, heavy and hard, cut Chuck off.

As the party readied themselves for whatever was coming, the hole overhead once more opened up. A long, pole-like something extended down from it.

Unable to understand what had happened, the party searched for an explanation until their eyes landed on Lapis, who was touching a portion of the wall. For a while, no one spoke, until Loren finally interpreted for the lot: “What did you do?”

“It’s hard to make out on the manamen wall, but this panel operates the hatch.”

Loren leaned down to inspect the section of faintly glowing wall that Lapis traced with her fingers. At a glance, it didn’t look like anything, but after staring at it fixedly for a while, he made out faint lines etched along the surface. As a non-magician, he couldn’t begin to fathom what it might mean. However, the professionals could vouch for Lapis’s find. Loren turned to them.

Chuck and Koltz immediately abdicated responsibility.

“Isn’t this up your alley, old man?”

“Fool. It’s up to a thief to find hidden mechanisms.”

The pole continued to stretch and stretch until it finally reached the floor. Soon enough, a number of handle-like protrusions sprouted from its sides, revealing it to be a rudimentary ladder.

“How should I put this...” Ritz muttered. “It feels like we wasted a lot of time.”

“Well, your excursion worked out nicely for Mr. Loren and myself,” said Lapis. “If you had returned to the upper floor the moment you arrived, we wouldn’t have been able to join you.”

“Luck is also a skill, they say,” Ritz mused. “Now then, we’re supposed to climb?”

Even including its horizontal bars, the pole wasn’t too wide. Nym and Lapis were one thing, but if Ritz, a well-built warrior with heavy equipment, set foot on it, it looked bound to snap.

“This is a facility of the ancient kingdom. I doubt any of its installations will break under human weight,” said Lapis, though she didn’t sound especially confident.

No matter how far the ancient kingdom’s technology surpassed that of the present era, it couldn’t beat the wear and tear of time. The long years might well have compromised the structural integrity of this relic.

“I’ll climb first,” Chuck volunteered. “If you want lightness, sure, Nym would do too. But if there’s a monster up top, I’m probably the only one who could jump back down relatively unharmed.”

Nym nodded. “Good call. It was nice knowing you.”

Chuck sighed, looking miserable. “I don’t think that means what you think it means.”

Perhaps Chuck wanted to take responsibility for failing to notice the escape route earlier. In any case, he grabbed the pole and climbed up with nimble movements befitting a thief. Soon, he had reached the top. He grabbed the rim of the open hole and hoisted himself up.

“All clear. Nothing up here.” Chuck leaned back over the edge and beckoned them up. “The ladder’s sturdy enough, though you should come up one at a

time.”

Now they just had to decide who went up next.

Loren watched Ritz’s back as he hauled himself up the ladder. He glanced at Lapis. Where Loren had done his best to maintain a sense of level-headed alertness, she remained in high spirits, smiling brightly, and he thought he now understood why. Lapis had, by chance, been able to explore ancient ruins she would otherwise never be permitted to enter.

“Hey, Lapis,” he said, taking care not to let his emotions into his voice. “I don’t mean to rain on your parade, but once we get up there, they’ll probably tell us to leave.”

She froze.

“They were down here because they didn’t know how to get out,” Loren went on. “If they get back to the upper floor, they’ll want to point us back the way they came.”

It was a simple equation of cost and benefit: the cost of shepherding copper-rank adventurers—potential liabilities—put up against the benefit of one blessing. The way Loren saw it, even if Lapis didn’t ultimately expend a blessing on the party, her critical role in revealing the way out more than made up for the protection the party had afforded them thus far. In their shoes, he would say, *You’re in luck, now out you get*. It would save him quite a bit of trouble. He expected these veterans had similar thoughts.

Lapis remained petrified.

She clearly hasn’t thought this through, Loren realized.

“What do we do?” she whispered. “This didn’t enter my calculations.”

“You’re surprisingly thick.”

“I was so caught up in the prospect of exploring ruins... But it is absolutely necessary to return to the upper floor. I wasn’t lying when I said we wouldn’t find anything down here.”

Lapis looked so troubled. Loren thought for a moment as he watched Ritz

laboriously climb. Personally, he wanted to get out of these ruins as fast as his feet could take him. Ancient kingdom ruins were, perhaps, a bushel of fun for adventurers and those driven by intellectual curiosity. To Loren, they held nothing but danger. Even so, seeing Lapis wallow in her failure made him want to grant her wish...even if it meant taking on some minor risks.

“Maybe if we had something else to offer,” he suggested.

“Other than my blessings?” Lapis frowned, contemplative. “That’s difficult. They’d get suspicious if I revealed I can use magic as well.”

“Do you have any special knowledge or technical skills or something?”

“Well, if we identify what kind of ruins these are, I probably have a pretty good idea of the layout.”

As ignorant of ruins as Loren was, that still sounded like incredibly useful information. If Lapis could describe the basic layout of this place without having to walk around and map everything, the party’s investigation would be much more efficient.

“That’s amazing, but how do you know that?” he asked.

Meanwhile, Koltz began climbing seconds after Ritz clambered over the edge. With his bulky robe and elderly body, Koltz moved even slower than the warrior. In fact, the two of them were so sluggish that Nym’s expression was gradually growing irritated. Loren, for his part, watched with the indifferent air of a man observing somebody else’s problem.

“Mr. Loren, could you describe the interior of an adventurers’ guild building?” Lapis asked.

“Not in detail. They’ve got a desk and a dining area. And a reference room, a storehouse, the guildmaster’s office... Something like that?”

As a new adventurer, Loren wasn’t exactly familiar with such structures, but he managed to blurt out some vocabulary he had heard tossed around a few times.

“Yes, the details don’t really matter. The point is that any building housing an adventurers’ guild branch has essentially the same structure. They construct

them this way so staff members still have an idea of where to find things even if they're transferred. The same could be said to apply to ruins."

Around the center of the ladder, Koltz missed a rung and fell right back down. He fell from a decent height, so Loren worried for a moment, but though old, Koltz was an adventurer. A strong blow to the behind couldn't stop him, and he quickly stood. He did yelp, however, when Nym, at peak irritation, kicked him back onto his backside. The kick didn't seem any more serious than this party's usual shenanigans. Loren nevertheless averted his eyes from the abuse.

"Even if that's not quite the case here, the architecture of the ancient kingdom is defined by an ethos that prioritizes efficiency, to a certain degree," Lapis continued. "Buildings serving the same purpose often share the same structure."

"Are there exceptions?"

"Of course. Every rule has an exception—often many more than that. Just so, every creed has its apostates, and at times you'll find some ancient kingdom ruins with truly outrageous structures." Lapis crossed her arms, still frowning. "What a troublesome matter."

Loren wasn't about to make anyone any guarantees, but he suspected that if Lapis told the party she had a trove of useful, if unspecific, information, she'd be rather convincing—especially given she was a priest of the god of knowledge. If she offered those insights up alongside the use of the blessing she'd earlier promised, perhaps the party would find the two of them valuable enough to outweigh the trouble they brought.

Lapis still looked troubled and groaned under her breath as she mulled this over; Loren was prepared to put in a bit of elbow grease to perk her up.

We'll bring it up before Ritz tells us to go home, Loren concluded. They'll be more amenable then.

Just as Loren reached this conclusion, Koltz reached the top of the ladder. The old man placed his hands on the ledge and pulled himself up, but the moment he did so, he froze.

Loren readied for danger.

“Trouble!” Chuck cried out, leaping past Koltz and thudding to the ground.

He was followed closely behind by Ritz, who shouted on the way down.
“Goblin stampede!”

Nym had her bow ready before Ritz had finished. Chuck landed without a sound, while Ritz touched ground with a dull thud.

“Jump down, Koltz!” Ritz yelled.

But Koltz was twice as high as he had been the last time he fell. A thief with nimble feet and a warrior with sturdy build could jump down from such a height without hesitation. The magician had his qualms.

The stampede made his decision. A club and a shortsword grazed Koltz’s head and shoulder, encouraging him to let go and fall to the floor, face-first.

In the time it took the rest to realize how terrible this landing might go, Loren had already moved. He moved at speeds unimaginable for someone shouldering such a hefty sword, scrambled up the ladder, and grabbed Koltz halfway to the ground. From there, he jumped, landing safely.

“S-sorry to trouble you,” Koltz gasped.

“Less talking! More running!” Ritz howled.

Loren’s head jerked up. Goblins poured down through the hole. He took off.

“What the hell is this?!” he yelled back at Ritz as the party pelted down the corridor.

“How am I supposed to know?! Never seen anything like this before—there’s so damn many!”

Ritz took position at the head of the group. Leader’s instinct, probably, rather than because he was the fastest. Loren slowed a bit to retake his position at the rear, letting Nym, Lapis, and Koltz get ahead. He called out to Chuck—he wanted details on what had happened up top.

Chuck just screamed. What could have made a silver-rank adventurer screech like that? Loren risked a glance over his shoulder and promptly groaned.

An avalanche of goblins poured down through the hole—more and more with

no end in sight. So many it was pointless to count. Some fell dead upon hitting the floor. Others were crushed. Others still squirmed out of the pile with broken bones, writhing with pain. Their sacrifice gave the goblins who followed a cushioned landing. Most now fell unharmed, ready to fight.

You didn't have to be Chuck to scream at the sight of that.

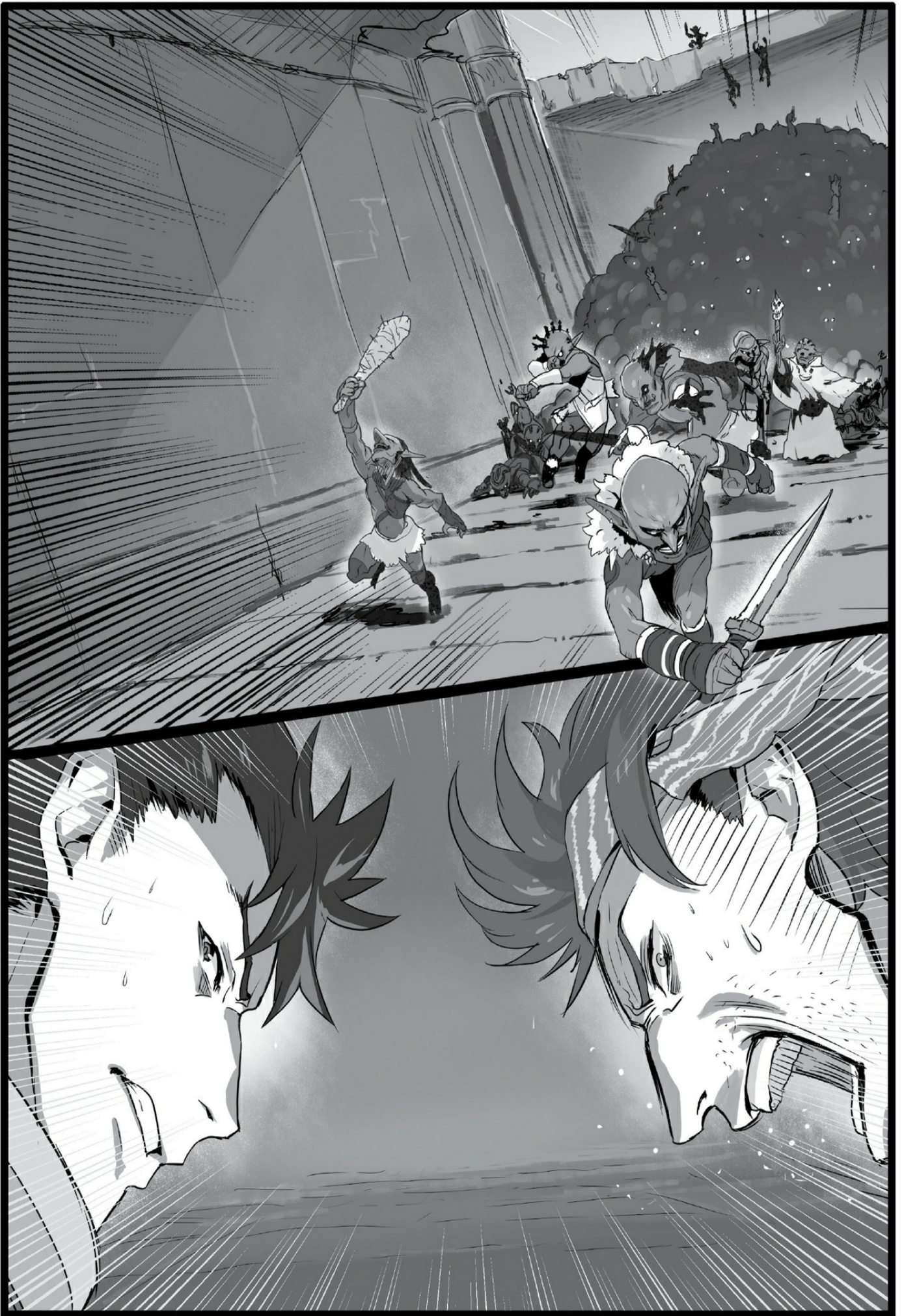
The never-ending goblin cascade obliterated the last shreds of Loren's desire to stand and face the enemy. He could think of nothing but of how to get the hell away.

"What the hell is that?! What the hell is all this?!" Chuck wailed.

"Aren't these supposed to be abandoned ruins?!" Loren snarled. "How are there so many?! Where the hell were they hiding?!"

"Dammit! I'm too pretty to die like this!"

Loren grit his teeth. "Shut up and run. That's all we can do now."



They moaned and groaned, urging one another to run faster and keep running. But where were they supposed to go? The party raced blindly from corridor to corridor. One wrong turn would spell disaster. If they hit a dead end, their only future would be goblins, goblins, and more goddamn goblins. Every soul in the party racked their brains for a solution, but the massive, surging wall of goblin flesh left them coming up empty. They had nothing left to do but pray the path kept going.

“Th-this is a bit—” Koltz gasped.

“W-we might be in trouble here,” Lapis panted.

Elderly Koltz ran out of strength first, followed closely by Lapis. Only Loren knew why Lapis flagged more quickly than the rest. The vigorous movement of her artificial magical limbs had to be draining her mana supply. The two started losing speed, and if this kept up, they’d fall behind Loren.

So he wrapped his arms around their waists and heaved them off the ground.

“H-hey, are you sure about this?” Lapis asked.

“I’m used to it.”

Running with incapacitated comrades in tow was an everyday trial for Loren. He’d had to carry or be carried countless times in his day, and with his company, he’d carried men of much more substantial size wearing near their own body weight in equipment. This time, under one arm Loren had an old man in a robe, and in the other, a girl in priest vestments.

Even so, it was two extra bodies. Yet Loren’s physical might allowed him to maintain speed.

“I’m sorry, young man... I’ll repay you someday...”

“I’m so sorry to be a burden once more.”

“Don’t worry about me,” Loren insisted. “Now you don’t have to think about running—so start using your heads and get us out of here. If this keeps up, we’ll falter, and the second we do, they catch up.”

Loren didn’t know whether goblins or humans had more base stamina on average, but in this scenario, only one side ran weighted down with equipment

and bags. The other hurtled forward essentially naked save for the weapons in their hands. In Loren's estimation, that gave the goblins a dangerous upper hand.

For now, the party kept the lead. Eventually, they'd tire. When that happened, they might as well not even resist. The sheer numbers—the veritable goblin tsunami—would crush them.

So Loren ran and ran, frantically keeping pace with the others, and as he did, he prayed the two under his arms figured out how to save them.

Chapter 5:

A Return to an Explanation

“INCINERATE THEM with *Fireball*?” Lapis suggested.

“Not with those numbers,” Koltz said. “It would take out less than a thimble-full. I could try, but I don’t recommend it.”

“Block them with *Earth Wall*?”

“Covering the whole passage? Maybe—but that still leaves the number problem. It wouldn’t hold for long. Buy time at best.”

Tucked under Loren’s arms, Koltz and Lapis debated how to deal with the army of goblins. Thus far, it was a largely one-note exchange: Lapis presented some idea, and Koltz explained why it wouldn’t work, rinse and repeat. Loren was starting to worry.

“What about *Firestorm*?”

“I have the incantation under my belt, yes, but I can

barely squeeze out two a day. Would that be enough against this many?”

Lapis glanced back, powerless and anxious. “Probably not.”

The goblins got no closer, but they didn’t fall back either. Anyone who tried to count the horde would soon give up. Even a non-specialist like Loren could tell the swarm would take more than one or two blasts of magic to deal with.

“Although, to be able to use *Firestorm*... You’re quite a capable magician, Mr. Koltz.”

“I’m more impressed by how well-versed you are in magic, Ms. Lapis.”

They exchanged a private smile from around Loren’s torso. Loren groaned and raised his eyes ceiling-ward. “Look, I’m glad you’re getting along. But if you don’t come up with an answer quick, we’re all goblin chow.”

“Oh, I believe Ms. Nym and myself are destined to be chowed upon in rather a different way.” Lapis replied.

Loren nearly choked—how could she joke about that?! But Koltz responded first.

“I’m not so sure about that. Seems likely they ate that thief, doesn’t it?”

“Well, I wouldn’t want to be the mother of a goblin, but I don’t exactly like the idea of being the meal of a goblin either.”

Her words, absent a shred of dread, made Loren queasy. *It isn’t like she’s not aware of the threat. Or does she really not think this is a crisis?*

“This might be bad,” Nym cut in. “I’m just about...”

Of the party members left running, Nym had the least stamina, and she seemed about to throw in the towel. Though Loren was strong, he already had two passengers and couldn’t feasibly take another. For argument’s sake, yes, he had the space if Nym clung to his back, but a third body would drain his stamina all the more quickly.

Of all people, Chuck interceded first. “You’re not done! Get on my back.”

“I’m sorry—worst case, I’ll be in your debt.”

“Wow, you’re really feeling it, huh?!”

Nym’s acquiescence shocked Loren, but it downright panicked Chuck. How were they going to get out of this? He had to do something.

“I have an idea,” Loren called out to the rest. “It’s not great, but it’s better than nothing.”

It was a little crazy—so what? If they didn’t try something real and concrete soon, they’d banter until they died, and that future wasn’t far off. Loren sped up a bit until he was shoulder to shoulder with Ritz.

“Do you remember the route we took?” he asked Ritz.

“I—no, Chuck should.”

The thief nodded, confirming his leader’s words.

“Then can we get back to the hole the goblins fell down from?” Loren asked.

“Can’t retrace our steps, but we doubled back a few times already, so it ain’t far,” said Chuck.

Loren grimaced. If they'd already looped around a few times in their blind dash, they'd wasted valuable time, energy, and legwork. In this state, they hadn't had the leisure to even realize it until now, let alone plan a real escape.

"Get us back to the hatch," Loren called to Chuck.

"The hell you wanna do there?!"

The hatch raining goblins was no more than a detestable hellhole to Ritz and Chuck; they couldn't imagine what Loren meant to gain by returning there.

"It's already spit up so many goblins," he said. "It must have run dry by now."

"What about it?"

"They can drop down in a wave—but they can't climb up the same way."

Goblins couldn't fly. You didn't have to be an adventurer to know that. And as long as goblins couldn't fly, they would have to climb stairs or ladders to get up to the next floor. When they fell, they could run down their prey without regard for their own casualties. But if they wanted to chase the party up a ladder like the one Lapis had brought down, they couldn't rely on the same number-based strategy. They would have to scrabble up one or two at a time, at best.

"They won't be able to crush us with numbers."

"S-sure, but they're not that dumb. They're not gonna wait for us to climb, right? It's over once they grab us," Ritz pointed out.

Loren had seen Ritz climb the ladder before. At his sluggish pace, it was basically a guarantee that the goblins would latch onto him and drag him down before he got far.

"We can buy some time with magic," Loren countered. "Burn their front line with *Firestorm*, then stall the ones behind with *Earth Wall*."

If they only erected a wall to stop an army with such forward momentum, it would crumble nigh instantaneously. First, they needed to kill that momentum, *then* they could block the path. Sure, it wouldn't hold the monsters off forever, but it would give them time to act.

"I see. That's within my capabilities." Koltz beat a hand against his chest. He seemed to have concluded Loren's plan was sound.

Even so, Ritz's face remained uneasy. "But I can't imagine even that holding back numbers like these," he said.

"We just have to get to the upper floor before the wall breaks," said Loren. "Even if worse comes to worst and you don't make it in time before it does, this is my plan. I'll be the last one up. Guard your backs."

"Are you serious? You know there are way too many of those things for you to do anything about them, right?"

"It's not like I'll be facing them all at once. I just have to take care of the ones that get through the *Firestorm* and *Earth Wall*." Loren grinned. "But hey, you better climb fast so I don't have to."

Ritz thought for a moment, then gave the order. "Chuck, lead us back to the hole."

"On it."

"Koltz, prepare to cast—you know what to do."

"Leave it to me."

"When we get there, Chuck, you go first. Then help everyone who climbs up after. But I'm the party leader. *I'll* take the rear," Ritz declared.

Loren shook his head. "You're too slow. The goblins'll have your ass before you're halfway up. From what I saw last time, the rear's not your strong suit."

"But I'm..."

"I can probably scale the ladder right quick, as long as I get support from up top. Right person in the right place, they say. That's all there is to it, really."

Ritz had already exposed his graceless ladder climbing. On the other hand, Loren had shown his dexterity when he caught Koltz. It was clear as day which of them belonged at the rear if they wanted to live, and Ritz could no longer argue.

"I may be a new hand at this adventurer stuff, but I was a mercenary before. I've taken rear guard enough times to grow sick of it. Just leave it to me."

"Sorry. It's in your hands."

Ritz nodded briefly, still running. Loren nodded back to say, *Don't mind it.*

"We're almost at the hole!" Chuck called anxiously. "You'd better pray it's fresh out of goblins!"

If it was still pouring goblins, they'd be stuck between the new wave and the one pursuing them. Their chances of survival would be practically nil. However, that would also mean the ruins housed a truly unimaginable number of the creatures, which Loren simply didn't think realistic. Hoped, anyway.

In the lead, Chuck spotted the hatch in the ceiling, left wide open. "It's clear!"

"Good! We're not out of luck just yet! Get climbing!"

Chuck slickly clambered up with all the speed of his sprint. A little behind him, Ritz readied his shield and sword, getting into a defensive formation in front of it. Nym slipped past and began climbing after Chuck.

"The magic, old man!"

"Let it swirl before mine eyes, o crimson flames, ye storm and burst.
Firestorm."

Koltz unleashed his magic on Loren's command. Eddying flames suddenly manifested from the nothingness of the floor and rose to swallow the goblins leading the charge. They blazed with an intensity that scorched the high ceiling, spanning the expanse of the passage, impossible to avoid. The spell swallowed a considerable number of goblins, whose shrieks filled the passage alongside the roar of the raging inferno.

"Rise for me, o wall of dirt. *Earth Wall.*"

The heat wave from the fire, the screams, and the stench of burnt goblins—all these were sealed away by an earthen wall.

"Now's your chance! Climb!"

Once released from Loren's arm, Lapis grabbed the ladder. She scampered up at a speed that rivaled Chuck's. In contrast, Koltz had just used two spells. Somewhat unsteady on his feet, he shambled up even more slowly than last time.

"Hey, hurry..." Ritz urged.

“Don’t rush him,” Loren said. “We don’t want him to fall.”

If Koltz slipped, Loren would have to save him again. Worst-case scenario, he wouldn’t make it in time, and the magician would hit the ground, thereafter injured and likely immobile. With that in mind, even if Koltz took more time, they had less to worry about if he went slow and steady.

“I get it,” Ritz said, tense, “but that wall won’t hold long.”

While Koltz’s spell combo had temporarily halted the goblins, they could already hear weapons beating against the wall in an attempt to break it down.

“What’s up with them?” muttered Loren. “The spell only lasted a moment, but you saw the flames. It should still be hot as hell back there.”

The floor and the walls should have maintained the heat. Loren had assumed the goblins wouldn’t dare walk on it, at least for a while. As far as he’d seen, the vast majority of them were barefoot; stepping on freshly seared floors would scorch their soles.

And yet, in a matter of moments, the goblins were pushing against the wall again.

“That settles it—there’s something wrong with them,” Ritz grimaced. “Goblins got no respect and no guts. I’ve never heard of them getting this persistent.”

Ritz looked ready to meet their foes, but he had paled. He clearly didn’t know what to make of these monsters. The unknown unsettled even a silver-rank adventurer.

“You can think about it later. Just focus on getting away,” said Loren. “All right, your turn.”

Koltz’s desperate efforts had paid off. He was being dragged up the last stretch by Nym and Chuck. Though he hesitated for a moment, Ritz sheathed his sword and began to climb as fast as he could. Unfortunately, that wasn’t very.

Loren prayed he made it up before the goblins broke through, but his wishes went unanswered. Before Ritz had even reached the ladder’s midpoint, a crack lanced down the earthen surface of the wall.

“Looks like I’ve got no choice,” Loren muttered. Lucky for him, the passageway was both wide and tall enough to swing his sword to his satisfaction.

Bit by bit, the crack grew deeper and longer. As Loren listened to the beating against the wall, he reached his right hand behind his back, capturing the hilt of his blade. He undid the cloth wrapping and drew it from his back. Gripping the bottom end of the hilt with his left palm, he took his stance.

It was as if the world had been waiting for him to finish. The wall finally reached its breaking point, and with one last massive crack, it gave way. A horde of ghastly burned and blackened goblins surged forward like water through a burst dam. Their war cries echoed as they fell on Loren.

However, though the wall was breached, it wasn’t entirely broken. The goblins poured through a single gap. For the most part, the wall held.

That means I can still buy time if I do this right. Loren psyched himself up as he lunged. A horizontal swipe with his greatsword split two goblins at the waist.

As the return slash took another life, he realized something was off. The floor beneath his feet was too clean. So many goblins had fallen from the ceiling—the collision with the ground and their fellow goblins should have killed a number right where he was now standing. In which case, he should have been fighting on a sea of goblin corpses. Yet while bloodstains dotted the ground here and there, the bodies that had left them were nowhere in evidence.

Now, Loren wasn’t too knowledgeable about monsters, but he had heard of a goblin’s vile diet. They were well-known to eat anything that could fit in their mouths. *Did they start eating their own?* he wondered. That still didn’t explain the total lack of any remains.

It’s one odd thing after another today, Loren mused as he continued to skillfully manipulate his tremendous sword with two hands. The shields and shortswords of lone goblins provided no resistance against its sheer mass and the momentum. The shields split all too easily, the swords shattered in a heartbeat, and as defenseless goblin bodies were turned to blood-spewing lumps of flesh, Loren shouted to Ritz without looking back. “Are you up yet?!”

“S-sorry!”

Ritz's panicked voice warranted an ever-so-slight glance. He was only a little over halfway up the ladder, slowly struggling as he went.

It's gonna take some time before he reaches the top. Loren embraced an emotion close to resignation as he offhandedly kicked away a goblin diving at his feet. He plunged the tip of his blade into its corpse. "Can anyone pull him?!" he called.

Ritz wasn't yet within arm's reach of the party at the top, but Loren asked anyway. The rupture in the wall was widening right before his eyes—the number of goblins slipping through it increasing in turn.

Loren narrowed his eyes, appraising the width of the gap. *I'm good. For now, anyway.*

He swung his sword again. The blade reverberated with every ugly sensation—tearing flesh, snapping bone. As he retreated so he wouldn't trip on the bodies piling before him, the bad news reached him from overhead.

"Mr. Loren!" cried Lapis, "We have movement up here again! Mr. Chuck and Ms. Nym can deal with it for now, but we think there's a number of them!"

"Goblins again?! Just how much do these little bastards love this godforsaken place?!" Loren once more swung his sword in irritation. Its trail left even more fresh corpses in its wake, dampening the floor with blood. He retreated another step from the remains. "Ritz! You there yet?!"

"Just a little longer!"

"I can hold out, but it sounds like trouble up there! Take too much time, and there'll be nowhere left to go!"

"I know! Dammit! Why am I so slow?!" Ritz cursed, desperation in his voice.

They'll have to manage on their own, thought Loren. He switched gears to concentrate solely on the enemies before him.

The wall continued to break even as they spoke, more goblins squirming through by the second. Soon, Loren wouldn't be able to take them out quickly enough to suppress the flood. As it was, he could barely manage to keep them from the ladder. For now, he had their attention, but once there were too

many, that strategy would fall through.

Impatience set in, bit by bit.

Despite this, Loren's rational mind noted some of the goblins doing something he could only call damn strange.

The goblins scrabbled through the wall seething with rage, no other thought in their head but murder. Yet the minute one of them spied a dead comrade, it was as if they suddenly forgot he existed. They would drop the weapon in their hands and immediately set about gathering up whatever bodies they saw. What's more, once this goblin could carry no more, they scampered off. Never once did they look back at Loren.

He had no way of knowing what would make a goblin act like that, but the strange behavior at least guaranteed he never had more than a certain number of the little buggers to deal with. No matter how bizarre he found the tic, it wasn't like he'd come equipped with encyclopedic knowledge of goblin behavior. It certainly wasn't like he could ask them what the hell they were up to.

So while their actions baffled, they had also created an opportunity—one he wouldn't waste. The theory didn't matter. As long as he kept a certain number of corpses scattered about, a proportion of the goblins would inevitably drop everything to carry them off. He could use this.

He found a rhythm. The goblins who zeroed in on him never stopped to collect corpses. If he prioritized killing them, the collector goblins would get to work clearing them off, and as a result, he could manage the tide a bit. It wasn't as if he could tell one goblin from another, but he slowly learned to detect the collectors. They had a certain air. He carefully picked them out and avoided killing them, where he could; they had another use.

Finally, finally, Ritz had reached the upper rungs. When he placed his hands on the rim of the hole, Koltz and Lapis pulled him up.

"Please hurry, Mr. Ritz," Lapis implored. "Mr. Chuck can't hold them all back."

"You have to pick up the pace, Ritz," called Koltz. "It looks like it's not just goblins anymore."

“What? You mean we’ve finally run into something else?” Ritz called.

“No, that’s...it’s gone from goblin to goblin-esque, perhaps.”

“What’s that supposed to—Chuck! Dammit! Chuck’s in trouble!” Ritz suddenly screamed, still only halfway out. In his frantic attempt to kick off the last rung, his foot missed its mark—he would have been on a crash course straight down if Lapis and Koltz hadn’t grabbed him, leaving him flailing his legs in the air.

How sloppy, Loren sighed. But he was needed up top, and there wasn’t a second to waste. “Good grief, why does this crap keep happening to me?!”

For the first time that day, Loren shifted his technique. He had thus far managed with no more than the strength of his arms, but now he twisted his whole body to channel the entirety of his might. He had already been smashing goblins with single swings, but once his hips were thrown into the mix, his blows grew sharper, faster.

The goblins that took these hits weren’t simply cleaved in two. They were turned into blasts of flesh and blood, their pulverized corpses becoming projectiles to take out the ones outside of Loren’s reach.

He had cleared his surroundings in one fell swoop and was sprinting to the ladder before the goblins up top reached the gap again. As he made his way up, he struck the ladder beneath his feet, destroying it so none could follow. He cleared the length faster than any of the others, hopping up onto the upper floor without assistance.

There, he swiftly scanned the area, sword at the ready. The first thing he saw was Chuck, propped up against the wall and bleeding from his head. Then, he saw Ritz, protecting Chuck with sword and shield, and Nym struggling against someone—or *something*—pinning her down.

“The hell’s that?!”

The fiends before him could only be goblins. Loren couldn’t describe them in any other terms. They *looked* like goblins, plain and simple. However, a goblin was supposed to be green and the size of a child. These creatures were closer to black and even taller than Ritz, who was a well-built man in his own right.

“Mr. Loren, Ms. Nym needs help!” Lapis called.

“What about your magic, old man?!” Loren snapped.

“Fresh out!” Koltz despaired. “I won’t even be able to use elementary spells for a while!”

One of these huge mock-goblins had collapsed, smoldering in the direction Koltz pointed. He had managed to take one out, but he had run out of magic in doing so.

“More importantly, Ms. Nym!”

Right. Only so much assessing you could do before you had to act. Loren kicked off the floor, hurtling toward this mock-goblin that scrabbled for Nym despite the dagger she had driven through its arm. He drove his boot into its face.

He had learned this kick could snap the neck of an ordinary goblin. However, this creature barely flinched, and once it had regained itself, it let out a low, intimidating growl. Loren ignored this, hammering his greatsword into the back of its neck.

“You gotta be kidding me!”

His blade, which had so easily smashed through the goblins below, juddered against the mock-goblin’s hard skin—and the layer of muscles underneath. It broke the surface but stopped short of the bone.

Reddish-black blood gushed from the injury, staining Nym beneath, but the creature paid its wound no mind. It reached out to grab Loren, the sword still dug into it.

Loren pressed down on the handle to hold it back. Not one to let such an opportunity slip past, Nym pulled out the dagger she’d skewered into its arm and stabbed the monster’s eye while its attention was on Loren.

Evidently, its toughness didn’t extend to its eyeballs. The mock-goblin let out an anguished scream, clawing at the dagger with both hands as it fell backward. In those seconds, Nym slipped out from under it.

Loren yanked out his sword, then slammed the blade into its throat with a

mighty yell. Once again, he felt unimaginable resistance from its skin and muscle. But Loren expected it this time. His blade tore through flesh, reached solid bone, and tore through that too. From there, the slash joined the gash at the back of its neck. That took off the mock-goblin's head in a fountain of blood.

"You okay, Nym?!"

"I'm fine. Chuck and Ritz are not."

As he looked over, Loren witnessed Ritz's longsword sliding through a mock-goblin's arm and embedding itself deep into its flank. He thought that would be the end of it, yet the beast moved as if its lethal wounds meant nothing at all, grabbing Ritz by the head.

"Hands off me, you damn dirty goblin!"

Even a goblin no larger than a child boasted considerable strength. When one grew taller than an adult, it was hard to imagine just how much force it packed into its arms—though it was easy enough to picture what conclusion awaited if it used all that strength to grip a head.

Ritz twisted his sword, thrashing to get away, but he couldn't escape the mock-goblin's firm grip. His body creaked and jarred as the mock-goblin's grip tightened like a vice. His foe would bleed out, but at this rate, it wouldn't go down alone.

"D-dammit! I'm gonna—"

Ritz had no option other than to be crushed, and he would have been, if Loren hadn't rushed forward.

While Ritz had the mock-goblin's attention, Loren had built up speed and centrifugal force with his blade, and he hammered all this into the base of its skull, taking its head.

Blood gushed from the cross-section. Its body twitched with its loss, after which it fell to its knees, powerless, and folded against the wall.

"You okay?"

"You saved me there. I was nearly squeezed out like a worn rag."

"Glad to hear it. What about Chuck?"

“I ain’t dead yet.” While Chuck was bleeding profusely from the head, he seemed fine enough.

According to him, they’d just dealt with normal goblins at first, when suddenly those bizarre iterations had joined in. While Koltz had roasted one with his magic, the hard skin of a second had defied Nym’s arrows. It had powered straight through her storm of arrows and tackled her. When Chuck tried to save her, he’d been sent flying by a third, which was when Ritz jumped in.

“I’m sorry, Chuck,” Nym said meekly. “It’s my fault.” She was so dispirited that her ears drooped.

Chuck turned away. “You’re creeping me out. That sweet act don’t suit you—so just drop it and treat my wounds, all right?” He prodded his head wound with his index finger.

Nym nodded and got to work.

Leaving the two of them to their own devices, Loren called out to Lapis, who was crouched over the two headless mock-goblins. “Did you figure something out?”

“I can speculate. But if those speculations are accurate, then we’ve wandered into quite a loathsome place.”

“What do you mean?” he asked dubiously. She’d been so happy at the prospect of exploring these ruins before that he’d never expected such words to leave her mouth.

But Lapis didn’t answer. She instead turned to Ritz, who was busy cracking his neck and rubbing his head where he had been grabbed. “Mr. Ritz, I want to go confirm something.”

“Do you need us to go with you?”

“Not really. However, it ought to align with your mission of investigating these ruins. Additionally, something quite terrible might happen if we don’t render this place dormant, and fast.”

What will you do? she implied with a tilt of her head.

The eyes Ritz sent Loren begged him to weigh in, but Loren just shrugged:

Don't ask me.

"For the time being, we should get well away from here," said Lapis. "If we dawdle, I expect the next attack isn't far away."

At this, Ritz went to check Chuck's condition. While his head wound had been treated, he wasn't doing great. He frequently shook his head in an attempt to regain his focus, but it didn't seem to be doing the trick.

"Do you want me to use a blessing?" Lapis asked.

Chuck shook his head again. "Save it. The potion's starting to kick in. Just a bit tipsy 'cause I took one to the head."

"Blows to the head can be quite dangerous. I recommend seeing a doctor once you get back to town."

"Oh, sure. If we get back in one piece, that is."

"You think you can move?" Ritz asked cautiously.

Chuck bared his teeth at his leader's fretting. "Enough stupid questions. I'll move as soon as you order me to."

"You shouldn't push yourself," said Nym. She was clearly just as worried about him, and his strong front didn't help.

"Just took a good knock." Chuck gave her a reassuring pat on the shoulder. "No worries. I can move just fine."

"That makes me the bigger problem. I'm all out of magic. You can't count on me to fight anymore," Koltz said, sounding terribly apologetic.

However, no one in Ritz's party was about to chastise him for his actions. They knew what would have happened if he had been late to cast that last spell—if he hadn't taken out one of the goblins that couldn't be goblins. The goodwill they held for him meant none would ever consider him a burden.

"Don't blame yourself," said Ritz. "All right, if we're all good, then we should get moving. More goblins might be on the way, and I don't know if we'll survive another go with those big ones."

Ritz had made the call. Chuck borrowed Nym's shoulder to stand, and while

slow, the party made their way from the site of battle.

At the lead were Loren and Lapis. No one disagreed. Loren had managed to slay two monsters that gave even a silver-rank party a tough time; granted, he had essentially taken both of them by surprise. Meanwhile, Lapis seemed to know something about the ruins.

“What even were those things? Their skin and flesh were hard, their bones even more so. That’s not normal. Were they another evolved form?” Loren asked Lapis, gazing down at the edge of the blade he now kept drawn. The sword had taken them out, but the nicks it had sustained from this encounter were terribly deep.

From the start, Loren had essentially used this blade as a blunt weapon he never expected to cut things with. Its edge was barely even honed. Yet just now it had chipped like any more typical sword, precisely where the blade had come in contact with the mock-goblin’s spine.

“Perhaps they were close to hobgoblins, at least in terms of size, but they were probably just normal goblins grown to an abnormal degree. No, I’m sure of it.” As they walked the corridors, Lapis seemed to have a clear direction in mind. It was as if she truly did know the layout of the ruins, and while she remained wary, her steps were certain. “In the first place, a hobgoblin could never have taken that blow from you and survived. Why, I’d wager you could even have decapitated an ogre with that strike. Am I wrong?”

“No clue, I’ve never fought one. Then what were they?”

“Have you noticed anything else, Mr. Loren?” Lapis said, which wasn’t an answer but another question.

Loren frowned; something had indeed been bothering him. “The goblins below were collecting the corpses of their fallen. Didn’t look like they were saving them to eat. There something wrong with the goblins in here?”

“Very perceptive of you. The goblins here are definitely abnormal.”

Lapis wasn’t walking particularly fast. Perhaps inevitable, considering the needs of Chuck and Koltz, but Loren didn’t know when the next goblin would appear, and her pace had him on edge.

It suddenly occurred to him that he had no iota of doubt that the next thing they encountered would be a goblin. Sure enough, from the nest to the ruins, the only things they'd ever come across were goblins. But that still didn't make them a guarantee. *Assumptions like that ruin your ability to react to the unexpected*, he cautioned himself.

"These ruins will only ever produce goblins," Lapis said, as if she were reading his mind. "Probably."

"What?"

These were supposed to be ruins of the ancient kingdom. Loren didn't understand why that meant the monsters infesting them would be goblins and only goblins. It wasn't as if he was hoping to meet one of those outrageously powerful guardians, but completely denying the possibility didn't sit right with him.

"Mr. Loren, are you aware of pharmaceuticals and alchemy?"

All of a sudden, Lapis changed the topic. He didn't see how this was related to their conversation. But seeing as the one bringing it up was a demon, there was probably some meaning to it. At least, that's what he hoped, so he played along. "I know what the words mean. Never knew anyone who practiced them, though."

"Just the meaning is enough. Do you know what particular animal such experts use to test their theories?"

Once again, Loren failed to comprehend the intent of her question, and he was momentarily at a loss for words. Then he got it. "Last I heard, it was rats. They use 'em to test new medicines and whatnot."

"Correct. Now are you aware of the reason rats are used?"

He didn't. Frankly, he knew barely anything about the topic at all. "You think they covered that in mercenary training?"

"No, I suppose it's just a useless bit of trivia to you. The reason they use rats is mainly because the rat estrous cycle is so short; they mature quickly and produce many offspring at once. Doesn't this remind you of a certain other beast?"

A beast that could breed with anything and near immediately reached adulthood. One whose population multiplied at an absurd rate. In the short span of time since they'd entered the cave, Loren felt he had seen more of them than he would have liked to see in his entire life.

"You don't mean goblins?"

"Precisely. Not only are they extremely easy to breed, they're economical, and no one would question the ethics of experimenting on them. What's more, they're humanoid, more or less. Can you think of any other entity more suited to being a lab rat? I didn't think so."

Lapis placed extra emphasis on this question, though Loren didn't understand what she was trying to emphasize. For the time being, he zeroed in on a word that had piqued his curiosity. "They're economical?"

"Because you can feed them anything. Leftovers, corpses, anything. By the records, a city of the ancient kingdom once tried tossing goblins in the city dump and consequently reduced waste production by eighty percent. Isn't that incredible?"

"I guess that's economical...in a way?"

"As a bonus, the ancients saw goblins as no more troublesome than dust; they didn't think they posed a threat no matter how many there were. And with all the selective breeding they conducted in their experiments, they produced quite a few different types at the time."

Different types of goblins. Like the ones he'd fought just a moment ago? If those weren't evolved forms, like hobgoblins, then it wasn't hard to tie them back to Lapis's tale.

"Thanks to these activities, a reasonable number of the ancient kingdom ruins we've unearthed thus far have turned out to be goblin farms. This place, however, is even worse than that." Lapis paused to let that sink in.

Loren had been all but ready to suggest the term "goblin farm" when she got the drop on him. *What could possibly be worse than that?*

"This isn't just a breeding ground," Lapis said as she rounded the next corner.

As she did, two goblins suddenly appeared, having been concealed by the bend.

Loren readied his sword at this surprise attack, but Lapis continued forward without care. She grabbed the goblin's heads as if plucking flowers by the side of the road. It didn't seem as if she put any particular power into the movement, and yet, while the goblins' bodies remained facing forward, she twisted their heads all the way around, tearing them off.

As the snap of broken spines echoed, Lapis retrieved a handkerchief from the pocket of her vestments. She dipped it in a bottle of what seemed to be perfume, then wiped the goblin grime off her hands while simultaneously unleashing two offhanded front kicks that launched their bodies a dozen feet away.

She didn't even glance at the silent husks as she continued on. This chain of movements had been far too natural. However, as she had done it right after a corner, only Loren had managed to see it.



“You... I never knew you had it in you,” he muttered. *If you could do that, you should have done it from the start*, he considered saying.

But if the other members of the party learned Lapis was versed in close combat, it would endanger her claim to priesthood. Most people who called themselves priests couldn’t twist off a goblin’s head with their bare hands.

“Well, I expect no less from myself,” Lapis sniffed. “Getting back on track, this isn’t just a breeding ground. It also serves as one, but it seems this place primarily carried out modification, enhancement, and refinement.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“To put it simply, this is a laboratory that aimed to strengthen goblins while keeping them as goblins per se. Of all the goblins chasing us, don’t you think it’s strange that we never spotted a single evolved form?”

Evolved forms were rare in and of themselves, but it wouldn’t have been strange for one or two to pop up, given the hordes they’d met. Actually, it was downright bizarre that they hadn’t seen any at all.

“The goblins produced here were probably modified such that they couldn’t produce evolved forms. You see, if the researchers wanted to enhance specifically goblins, hobgoblins and goblin magicians wouldn’t be of any interest, and they might even contaminate the experiment.”

Well, that tracked, but even if the research subjects were goblins, Loren couldn’t help but grimace at the ancient kingdom’s attitude toward experimenting on living beings. All things given, the mindless murderous intent with which the goblin wave pursued intruders was most likely one of these modifications. An order that had been imprinted on them. This farm’s ever-growing goblin population was an built-in security system of sorts.

“These people didn’t mind if they grew bigger, though?”

The ones he’d fought just now couldn’t possibly be called “goblins,” not really. Lapis could explain it away all she wanted, but Loren couldn’t bring himself to accept it.

“Even if they grow, a goblin is just a goblin.”

“What about the ones we met first? They probably got out of the ruin through the crack, and they had a goblin magician with them.”

“I presume the modifications only occur within the interior of these ruins. They could evolve *because* they escaped. Yes, I’m sure of it.”

Lapis’s tone seemed to say, *Can’t you at least understand that much?* But Loren didn’t understand, and he didn’t want to understand either.

“Whatever the case, that is what I make of this facility,” she said. “I believe it was dormant, but it was reactivated somehow. Perhaps someone did so intentionally, or perhaps simply undoing the seal automatically started it back up. I don’t know.”

“So why was that thief’s body just destroyed? And why are they collecting corpses?”

“The goblins didn’t take that woman because there would have been no point in doing so. If this facility is like the other goblin farms, it has a special synthesis area where new goblins are produced. The corpses, on the other hand, are presumably the materials from which they make new varieties. How environmentally friendly, to reuse all their trash!”

“And why will there be trouble if we don’t shut it down?” Loren asked. Lapis had said as much before, and he still didn’t know what she meant by it.

“That large, black variety was an improved version of a goblin,” Lapis continued as if she didn’t regard the matter as anything particularly serious. “It must have been produced in this facility. The problem lies in how it acts.”

“What about it?”

“The goblins here don’t need broodmares. And yet, that goblin assaulted Ms. Nym, specifically”

It took Loren a moment to catch up, but the moment he did, he turned pale.

“Ah, there you go. It assaulted a woman without need. In other words, it had an interest in assaulting a woman for purposes other than reproduction.”

Fundamentally, animals mated in order to produce offspring. That was largely the same for monsters, and while goblins additionally used it as an outlet for

their sadism, they only initiated the practice in the name of reproduction. But if they had no need of women to reproduce... Loren knew of only one species in the world who engaged in such vile behavior for the sake of it.

“As such, we must conclude there has now been some human mixed into the new varieties. Most likely the people from the party Mr. Ritz was competing with.”

“Can you still call those goblins?!”

“Why, yes. Of course they are. At the very least, you wouldn’t call a goblin a half-goblin simply because it was born from a human mother. Therefore, a goblin with human traces is still a goblin.”

Loren’s head hurt as he tried to wrap his brain around this. Ultimately, he gave up on trying to understand. All he really needed to get was that these ruins had been made to breed goblins, they were still active, and a portion of the goblins now had traces of human intelligence.

“The *problem* I’m referring to is that this was, once, a facility that strengthened and enhanced goblins. And the goblins here have now gained a unique new intelligence as well as learning capabilities.”

“You mean...”

“Once the bodies of those larger mock-goblins have been collected, this facility will use their data to produce even stronger varieties. Should that process repeat enough times... If a goblin, which is well known to be as tenacious as a dragon, were to accumulate knowledge, experience, and skills to back up its monstrous instincts, what do you think would happen? *That* is why I said we had to shut this place down.”

That all said, Lapis didn’t seem all that bothered as she described a future Loren didn’t even want to think about. It was as if she thought it largely someone else’s business.

Chapter 6:

Ransack to Epiphany

“So, DO YOU KNOW how to shut it down?” Loren knew they had to somehow lay these ruins to rest, but the concept of doing so didn’t intuitively make sense to him.

“Lower your expectations a bit. There are plenty of things even I don’t know,” Lapis said.

She knows so much about ruins, but not the thing it’s most critical for us to know, Loren found himself thinking.

“In the first place, it changes from ruin to ruin,” she added huffily. “There’s no unconditional method that works for every single one. It is *not* that I’ve neglected my research.”

“S-sure.”

“It’s written all over your face, Mr. Loren. You shouldn’t look at people like that.”

“In that case, where exactly are we headed right now?” Ritz butted in for the first time, having been quietly listening from behind. Loren had the same question, and it would conveniently change the topic.

Lapis still looked a little displeased as he urged her on with his eyes, but after heaving a profound sigh, she answered: “I thought it would be prudent to first visit the private rooms of the ancient kingdom residents who operated these facilities. Someone was once responsible for all this, so it’s with their things that we’re most likely to find the manual to this place.”

“You mean people actually lived in here?”

As far as Loren knew, no one had any detailed information on where the ancient kingdom’s capital had actually been. Some said it lay at the bottom of the sea; others speculated it had flown through the sky. However, there were no credible records of its location, or of how it had fallen. If any kind of

legitimate hint were ever found, adventurers would surely swarm the area seeking lost knowledge and technology, and it would soon be stripped to the bone.

That said, Loren highly doubted such information would be unearthed in the wild, untamed land near a frontier town. In fact, given this ruin's purpose, he didn't want to believe any human had ever withstood living there. It shocked him to think that people of that vaunted kingdom had deigned to sleep in such an inconvenient hellhole.

However, Lapis went on like this was the most obvious thing in the world. "While they did possess teleportation magic, such spells take up an enormous amount of mana. It just wouldn't be worth it to waste so much power every time they needed to get from the lab to town and back, you know?"

"No. I don't know."

"Considering the cost, they likely decided to just make a residential area at the testing site so they could live there comfortably."

"Is that how it works?"

"Yes, that is precisely how it works. And so, there should be a residential area in these ruins for the researchers and other related parties. I'm going to fish through the documents there for you-know-what, and if I find something else nice, I plan to secretly make off with it."

"Don't boldly proclaim your thievery," Ritz tiredly retorted.

Lapis didn't skip a beat, clenching her fist and making an even stronger declaration. "The owners have been dead for several hundred years. It's not theft; it is my right."

"But you know," Loren cut in, "if this place was dormant until recently, doesn't that mean the people of the ancient kingdom turned it off or whatever? Wouldn't they have taken anything valuable with them when they did?" It was what he would have done had he been in charge of the place.

Lapis abruptly deflated, disappointed. "Yes, perhaps. And in that case, all the important documents might have been taken as well."

“What will you do then?”

“What will I do?”

Seeing as she returned the question, Loren sent a troubled look behind them. Ritz’s party was no longer in any state to fight. Ritz and Nym were still able, but Chuck was wounded, and Koltz was just an old man now that his magic had run out. Loren himself couldn’t say he was in great condition either.

His greatsword’s edge had been nicked against the hard skin, flesh, and bones of the mock-goblins, and the flat wasn’t much better off. It was starting to bend ever so slightly. Granted, the mock-goblins weren’t solely to blame. He had come straight here from a battlefield, never once stopping to give it proper maintenance. This he did feel the need to repent for, but regrets would not better the situation.

“It might snap in another three swings.”

“That *is* a problem. Should we also scrounge up a new weapon for you while we’re here?”

“No. I’ll think about it when it actually breaks. Right now, the information should be our priority.”

“Now you’re getting it. And off we go!” With that, Lapis threw open a door halfway down the passage. She had done so without checking for traps, which took Chuck the thief by complete surprise, but Lapis brazenly stepped forward without a care in the world.

I guess we’re in the residential area already. She must figure no one was gonna booby-trap their own door. Granted, Loren also thought Lapis was being way too gung ho about all this. She didn’t even hesitate before she started digging through the drawers.

“Is this gonna be okay?” Ritz warily entered a bit behind, but all Loren could do was shrug. It was true he had no answer, and not saying that aloud was the least consideration he could offer.

“I happen to know a thing or two about ruins. Just leave it to me,” said Lapis.

The room did in fact give off the air of past habitation. There was a desk, a

bookshelf, and a bed, and they were all falling apart. A testament to the many long years they had been left unattended. Furthermore, the way Lapis showed absolutely no reservation as she crudely flipped things over and turned them inside out either meant she really was as knowledgeable as she claimed to be... or she was acting out at random with no goal in mind. It was hard to decide. At present, she looked far more like a burglar than a priest.

“She definitely knows more than us. Let’s leave her to it,” Loren said. It was the greatest reassurance he could muster.

“Isn’t there anything halfway useful in here?” Lapis muttered.

Lapis’s search took her from room to room in a flash. She hadn’t found what she was looking for but still managed to unearth several books, ornaments, and coins of a bygone era. The books were written in a script neither Loren nor Ritz could read, but according to Lapis, a few of them did have to do with the ruins. They would apparently be sufficient evidence for the party to claim they had completed their exploration.

“Could we just call it quits with these and leave without you?” asked Ritz.

His party’s job had been and still was to explore the ruin; it had nothing to do with putting an end to its operation. Now that the quest was complete, it made sense for them to return to town and report in. They could then entrust the matter of shutting the facility down to the country or the guild’s top brass.

Loren didn’t see this as heartless. He would have proposed something similar had he been in their shoes—especially when one of their allies was injured and their fighting capability had been halved.

“I don’t really mind, but good luck getting out,” Lapis said lightly. Yet her tone made clear that she understood the state of Ritz’s party. In their current condition, they’d be fine if they were profoundly lucky and escaped the cave without any encounters. However, if they ran into another pack of goblins—or even just one of the larger mock-goblins—they were almost certainly done for.

As such, their choices were to either brave the old danger and depart or to risk the new danger that came with accompanying Loren and Lapis. However, the latter option came with an additional frontline fighter and a priest who could use blessings. Both options had pros and cons. It was ultimately a decision

for their party to make, and they didn't need an outsider to weigh in.

"Wouldn't you be better off leaving with us?" Ritz offered. "It's not like anything's gonna happen here in the next few days, right? Let's go report it and leave it to someone higher up."

"By higher up, do you mean a gold or an augent rank?" Lapis asked. "How long will it take for them to arrive, I wonder?"

These ranks were one and two above silver, respectively. The system went copper, iron, silver, then gold and augent. However, it was said that anyone who could reach those higher ranks possessed powers exceeding the limits of mortals. The guild elevated only those who would prove without doubt they had earned the title, and such adventurers were few and far between. The number of gold-rank adventurers in the world was barely in the triple digits. Those who had reached augent were in the low doubles.

The legendary rubrum rank, highest in the lands, numbered so few that they could be counted on two hands.

In any case, there was no telling how much time and money it would take to mobilize such limited personnel.

"I won't stop you, if you want to leave," said Lapis. "I'll pray for your safety."

When she put it like that, Ritz could do naught but shut up and look down.

"You're pretty ruthless," Loren whispered to her.

"Nobody stands to gain from *forcing* them to come with us," she replied just as quietly.

"And you've already somehow concluded I'm sticking with you?"

"Well, that's, ah..." Flipping wildly through the book she had pulled from one of the bookshelves, Lapis fell into a troubled silence. Eventually, her hands froze. She looked up at Loren. "Won't you? Come with me, I mean."

"That ship has already sailed. Don't plan on leaving just yet."

"That's good. Amazing as I am, this would be too much for me to handle alone. Thank you."

Loren scratched the tip of his nose, averting his eyes from her beaming smile. He had just realized he had no memories of ever being properly thanked. Lapis's straightforward words and expressions didn't make him feel bad, not at all, and yet, for some reason, he found himself beset with embarrassment.

"Oh, and to repay you, Mr. Loren, I have some good news."

"What is it now?"

Having come so far, Loren didn't take the words "good news" too seriously. Not a single good thing had happened to him since he agreed to join Saerfé's party on a goblin hunt. And while he silently lamented this, he made sure the grief didn't reach his face.

Ignorant of his mental anguish, Lapis proudly brandished her latest book before his eyes. There was no doubt it was old. Perhaps by coincidence, or because it was kept well-preserved, despite the fading and the worn edges, the letters printed on it could be made out quite clearly.

"You think I can read that?" he asked.

"This is the ruins manual I was looking for. It dutifully spells out precisely how to deactivate it."

"*You* can read text from that era? That's pretty incredible."

"Well, I'm not a priest of the god of knowledge for nothing."

I'm not so sure about that, Loren thought. He studied the tome closely. Lapis had peeled back the black leather binding, gesturing at a certain page and insisting the instructions lay upon it. Of course, Loren couldn't make heads or tails of it.

"Are all of his priests so well versed?"

"Some of them are. Namely me."

Given how Lapis's eyes trailed a bit to the side as she said that, Loren surmised this ability actually had nothing to do with her being a priest. It was just Lapis being herself.

"So what are we supposed to do?"

“There’s apparently a control room. We’ll be able to deactivate the facility if we fiddle with the access panel there, so that’s where we should head now. Mr. Ritz, what is your party going to do?”

Ritz glanced at his comrades, then Lapis, for a short while, looking lost. Finally, he found his resolve. “We’ll go with you guys. I get the feeling we have better chances together.”

“Is that so! Then we’ll have to hurry. So long as we make it, this incident is as good as resolved.” Lapis closed the book and tucked it under her arm.

Their plan was decided—all that remained was to carry it out. That was what Loren read from the stiff faces before him, but he reserved some private room for pessimism. No way would they reach the control room without incident.

“Whoever managed this place was an upright person. Relatively speaking. I mean, he didn’t hide the answer in obtuse riddles or send us on a wild goose chase for random keys,” Lapis said as she jogged—presumably toward where she thought the control room lay. “The dreadful ones give you such terrible riddles, they make you want to grab their creator by the lapels and scream, ‘How was I supposed to know that?!’”

“You sure about that?” None of this really scanned to Loren, but that wasn’t the real issue. For starters, now he was wondering where she’d gotten the chance to explore ruins before. And while he did want to ask, when he considered the terrifying answers he might get, he duly decided against doing so.

“I just read about it in a book,” she said.

“That so.”

She had apparently noticed his implication. Her reply sounded like an excuse, no matter how he sliced it, and Loren had his doubts. Incredibly strong ones at that. Lapis was the sort of girl he’d readily believe if she claimed to have rummaged through ten, even twenty ruins before.

“I really did read about it!” she insisted.

“Yes, yes, we believe you, so please get back on track!” Ritz exclaimed from his place running a bit behind. While his party had decided to tag along, that didn’t change the fact they were in no state to fight, and their leader had no interest in increasing their odds of encountering goblins.

Loren was pretty sure Ritz would be able to handle quite a few normal goblins on his own. After a run-in with their more developed cousins, however, it seemed he had come down with a terrible reluctance to fight any more goblins ever again.

“Dammit, what a terrible quest,” the warrior sighed.

“My thoughts exactly.” Loren couldn’t blame Ritz for the anxiety. Now, he didn’t know what exactly a typical ruin exploration entailed, but he wanted to believe this specific ruin was exceptionally horrible. Surely not all such quests could be this bad. *I guess they’re pretty unlucky for having accepted it.*

“We’re also pretty unlucky for wandering in here by chance,” Lapis muttered beside him.

“Do you read minds or something?”

“Your face is an open book, Mr. Loren. You really should take care.”

He rubbed his face to rid it of whatever clues were apparently on it. The mercenaries he’d known had never really examined each other’s expressions too closely, and none of them ever tried to guess what was on the other’s mind. Everyone had his own story, and everyone kept to his own. Perhaps that was why he had never been told such a thing before. Still, for her to guess his thoughts so accurately, he had to wonder just how easy his expressions were to read.

“Incidentally, the tough luck award would have to go to the party Mr. Ritz is —*was* competing with.”

“Yeah, point taken.”

“Now then, let’s stop talking for a moment so that I might inform you we’ve arrived.”

Lapis had stopped in front of a set of double doors, quite a large one at that.

They had no visible knob or keyhole, and for a moment, Loren carefully studied the whole doorway, wondering how it was supposed to open.

Lapis wasn't so cautious. She brazenly walked up and swiftly swiped her free hand—the one not holding the book—against its surface. The line her fingers drew burst into light; the door swung inward without a sound.

“That’s something,” he murmured.

“Don’t be too impressed yet.”

The door had opened up to a vast room. The wall directly across from it was entirely lined with stacks of large, glossy black boxes, though their purpose eluded Loren. Once again, they were covered with letters he couldn't read, and patterned with twisting, meandering lines that rolled horizontally across their surfaces.

Nothing else notable occupied the space. It was a terribly dreary, empty room, though for some reason, the double doors on the left and right walls caught his eye.

“This has to be the control room. From here, we can manage the facility operations.”

Lapis walked up to the wall of boxes and stroked the surface of one. Then she began tapping at it with some sense of purpose. It wasn't long before the letters and lines scrawled across the box wall's surface shifted in response to her movements, though Loren could only tell that something had changed, and he didn't know to what end.

“Do you know what you’re doing?” he asked.

“Of course I do. Just leave it to me. This should be a cinch to someone of my...” Lapis stopped.

Something had clearly gone wrong, and as Loren peeked at her hands, he noted a stream of bizarre red letters flowing across the surface of the box directly in front of her.

“That’s...not right?” she murmured.

“What is it now?”

“This is strange. For some reason, I’m being booted out. I managed to bring up the command console and was just about to enter the abort key. But. Well.” Lapis repeated the same exact motions, an unsettled look on her face. The same bright red letters once more ran across the box.

Loren couldn’t read them, but he knew she had been rejected again. As the party exchanged anxious looks, Lapis furrowed her brow, flipped through the book again, and tilted her head.

“How peculiar. I don’t think I did anything wrong.”

“Any ideas as to why it wouldn’t work if you did it right?”

“If I *had* any ideas, I would have *done* something about it by now. Maybe the equipment itself has begun to malfunction over the years? In that case, there’s nothing I can do.” Lapis slid her fingers over the box’s surface again.

This time, the entire box turned red with black letters cascading across it. This sudden change made the wary veteran adventurers lurch back. Loren remained by Lapis’s side, anxiously watching over her.

Lapis put a finger to her chin and pondered the matter a while, then clapped her hands together. “Oh, that’s right. Why, this used to be a research facility, didn’t it?”

“What about it? And wait, what does the red mean? What does it say?”

“A research facility is where you find researchers,” said Lapis.

“That sounds about right.”

“And researchers should all be properly registered to the facility.”

“So what? What are you trying to say?”

Loren’s grew slightly irritated as he failed to follow, but Lapis paid his mood no mind. She was already back to sliding her fingers over the box.

The letters streaming across the surface gradually increased in number and speed, until eventually the light from the walls surrounding them changed to an uncanny red. All three of the room’s doors suddenly flew wide open.

“Hey? What just happened?” Ritz asked, frightened.

Lapis's hands froze. "I failed the biometrics," she replied without looking his way.

"Bio...bio what now?"

"This equipment was engineered so only registered researchers could input orders. When someone outside the system—meaning me—touched it, it rejected my commands."

"That can't be good."

As they began to realize what was going on, Ritz's party grew flustered. Lapis continued her work regardless.

"And because I failed three times, the system went into lockdown. Now it won't do anything for me."

"Is that what the red letters said?" Loren asked, but he had a vague sense that he was wrong. He was growing increasingly pessimistic, which was completely warranted, seeing as everything about his life lately had tended to take a turn for the worse.

"No, that's something else. The first red letters were warnings, but not anymore."

"Then what do they say now?"

"To put it simply, we have been identified as unlawful entrants."

What Lapis so casually divulged was, in fact, a serious problem, the sort that should never be treated casually. This new information brought a tight smile to Loren's face and pale horror to the others'. Lapis simply continued her work.

"The hell do you think you're doing?! You just made things worse!" Ritz howled, but before he could grab Lapis, he was restrained by Nym and Chuck. They knew hitting her wouldn't accomplish anything, but it was clear from their faces that they didn't know what to do either.

"The facility's defense system has been activated," said Lapis.

Maybe Lapis thought she was making sense, but Loren didn't have a clue what she meant. "Could you be a bit more specific? What exactly are we expecting?"

Lapis took a moment to get her thoughts in order before spelling out the situation. “The facility has identified us as intruders and is directing the goblins to remove us from the premises.”

Despair washed over the party’s faces. Loren, meanwhile, gripped his sword in both hands and prepared for battle. He needed to be ready for close combat if one of the large mock-goblins appeared, but there was no guarantee that was what they were facing. While the room had three entrances, he couldn’t imagine the enemy would flood in from each one simultaneously. What’s more, if they were just facing ordinary goblins, the situation wasn’t completely hopeless.

“I’ll try my best to cheat the system,” Lapis said. “We’re safe the moment I’m in—it won’t matter how many goblins there are.”

“And you want us to buy time, right?”

“I’m sorry I have to ask it of you. But I will be defenseless while working.”

“How do we know you can do it?” Ritz asked. Despite his despair, he was painfully aware that fighting was now his only option, and his grim expression showed that resolve.

Again, Lapis never stopped tapping away as she answered, “Because I’m a priest of the god of knowledge!”

“That’s not a justification, you know?” Loren retorted.

She was getting quite a bit of mileage out of that line, and she honestly seemed to believe she could explain away nearly anything with it. Loren feared that, at this rate, she was going to give other people some strange ideas about this god-of-knowledge business. *I wouldn’t want them to have any misguided expectations when they meet a real priest of his.*

“I haven’t lied to you, not even once,” she sniffed.

“Maybe not. Whatever. Just keep doing what you’re doing.”

Loren had much more to worry about than misplaced hopes at the moment, so he let that be the end of the matter for now. Lapis nodded in return, for once utterly serious, before immersing herself in the device and hearing no more.

It wasn't long before Ritz yelled, "They're coming!"

The wide-open doorways were filled up with the small, typical variety of goblin. However, while there weren't as many as there had been in the torrent that chased them through the corridors below, the horde was by no means small.

Furthermore, the very ground they stood on had identified them as intruders. If it was taking steps to purge them, there was no telling how many more goblins were on the way. If this early wave was just an indicator, then the next would be even larger—and that might have broken anyone.

"Are you kidding me?!" Ritz howled at the heavens. "Koltz, you stick with the missy! You too, Nym, I'm counting on your support fire! Think you can do this, Chuck?!"

"Can or can't, I just gotta, goddammit!" Chuck called back with all his strength, no doubt hoping to dispel all worries about his injuries.

He looks passably all right, Loren thought as he swung his sword. He had been given ample space to wield it without issue. The problem was its durability—for now, he chose not to think of it and smacked the weapon's edge into the goblins that leapt at him.

It was more a club than a blade. A few of the leaping goblins were torn in two; those that weren't crackled with the dull snapping sounds of broken bones as they fell writhing to the floor. Loren crushed the ones who survived underfoot, his eyes already seeking out his next challenge.

One of the large mock-goblins had arrived.

"Oh, for crying out loud! It's here!" Ritz called.

"I'll deal with it."

It was entirely possible that no weapon in the ruins could endure the might of that towering mock-goblin. The monster ran at them, its empty hands gaping, ready to grapple. Trauma from the previous attack locked Ritz and his party in place, but Loren brandished his greatsword and charged.

He lowered the blade with a yell; the brunt of its force struck the mock-goblin's left arm and sank in from its shoulder to its collar bone.

The wound poured black blood. As the mock-goblin cried out in pain, Loren dug his foot into its torso and kicked to yank the blade out. With the force of the release, he swung again. He aimed at the mock-goblin's flank, which had been left wide open as it held its broken left arm. Luckily, the sword struck where there was no bone. The strike tore through, undeterred by the monster's sturdy skin and flesh. Its entrails splattered to the floor.

That didn't stop it, however. It grabbed at Loren before he could exit his own swing. He was, for a brief moment, dumbfounded by its sheer strength. Then he recovered himself and pulled the sword back for a thrust. The blade's pointed end found its home in the mock-goblin's windpipe, the hole it opened spraying air and blood as the monster finally fell to the floor.

"Damn, that guy's really something," Ritz muttered in a daze.

"If you've got time to be impressed, use it to kill some goblins, would you?" Loren shouted back as he glanced down at his sword. Though stained black with blood from hilt to point, it didn't look too damaged yet. But the reverberation from the strike to the mock-goblin had told him the blade didn't have much left to give.

"That's not good," he murmured, as he mowed down the goblins closing in on him.

While the blade had the durability to withstand normal goblins, the larger ones were a different story. Each attack he unleashed against them significantly worsened the weapon's condition.

"How much longer, Lapis?!"

He didn't understand what exactly she was doing to the ruins, but she'd said the goblins would no longer be an issue if she succeeded. At the moment, his only option was to trust her and pray that she finished before his sword was completely useless.

"I'm doing my best here," she replied.

Beside her stood Koltz, who could do nothing. Next to him was Nym, who

nocked arrow after arrow, picking out goblins with impressive accuracy. With every twang of her bow, a goblin's throat or eye exploded in blood. But each fallen monster was all too quickly replaced by another in the endless stream that followed.

"Unfortunately, I'm up against the safety measures of the ancient kingdom," said Lapis. "Why, it's unimaginable to think they could ever be so easily overcome. Please understand you're putting me on the spot here."

"Quit beating around the bush! I'm asking for an estimate."

"More than a few minutes but less than an hour."

Loren clicked his tongue—what a horrid answer, absolutely ambiguous and totally useless. He didn't even have the means to measure an hour here. Sure, if he were in a town, he could check the magic clock that was erected per regulation in every square. But outside of towns, there was hardly any means of checking the time to such an accurate degree.

He was more than well aware of how pointless it would be to shout at Lapis now. But here he was, buying time, without knowing how much to bargain for.

"If only I had some magic left," Koltz moaned.

"You had no choice. No one blames you," Nym consoled him, voice level. But her face turned grim as she tapped her quiver to listen for its contents. "Ugh. I'm almost out too."

She would have been better off if she could have recovered the ones she'd fired, but the room had devolved into an all-out brawl. She wouldn't get that chance.

"There's no end to them! I can barely step anywhere with all these dead bodies!" Ritz snarled.

Still, so long as more mock-goblins didn't appear, Chuck and Ritz could handle the rest without issue. Normal goblins were no match for these silvers.

As the mounds of corpses increased, choking the room with their size and stench, Loren noted the appearance of collector goblins here and there.

"So they'll do their job even at times like these," he said.

“Yes, well, they are valuable resources,” said Lapis, not turning from the boxes, “and valuable data, after all.”

Loren took out several goblins with one swing and held his sword ready for the next volley before turning his head to Lapis. No matter that he had to keep fighting, taking care not to slip on the blood and guts smearing the floor that glowed ever stronger—he paused. He couldn’t let that slide. “Could you repeat that?”

“They are valuable resources and valuable data?”

“I get the resource part. Data?”

“The bodies. I’m positive they’re being used as data for goblin enhancement. You can only truly accumulate combat data through physical experience, after all.”

You mean... Loren looked down at the tens—hundreds—of goblin corpses at his feet. Their bodies would be collected and recycled somewhere in the ruins, thereby producing new goblins. When that happened, the machinery of the facility would rummage through their dead brains, extract all their valuable experiences, and apply those to the new specimens. These accumulated experiences were the cornerstone of goblin enhancement.

Loren understood that already, but a new epiphany left him faintly dizzy, and he had to hold his head. “You mean, the more we fight...”

“The tougher the goblins become. Incidentally, as long as the bodies have been built, it apparently only takes a few seconds to install the experiences. At least, according to the manual.”

Just as a chill ran down Loren’s spine, the next batch of goblins roared as they barreled headlong through the open doors. Ritz and Chuck fought these newcomers with haggard faces, and they tensed all the more as they noticed something different about this oncoming wave.

The previous goblins had been goblins, plain and simple. They’d blindly swung their weapons, haphazardly guarding themselves with crude shields. These new beasts moved with purpose—they knew how to manipulate their weapons, and they seemed accustomed to positioning their shields. Their fighting style

diverged wildly from any goblin the silvers had ever fought before.

“What’s up with them?! They’re not going down easily!”

“Stay down like a good goblin!”

Still, their techniques were crude and childish, and no match for silver-rank adventurers. That said, they were still a threat in sufficient numbers. While they had yet to suffer any major injury, Ritz and Chuck were both decorated with minor cuts and bruises. Worse, once upon a time, every one of Nym’s arrows had reliably taken out a goblin. Now, one here, another there, they deflected her shots with their shields.

Then Lapis read out something no one wanted to hear. She was tapping the boxes with her left hand and flipping through the manual with her right. “Once a sufficient number of normal goblins have accumulated these experiences, thereby establishing their validity, the information will be applied to the enhanced versions.”

If they could trust what she read, then soon enough, the knowledge these lightweight goblins accrued would be transmitted to the next batch of enhanced mock-goblins. The mock-goblins were already a trial and a half to defeat. If the next time they attacked, they came equipped with an understanding of how to truly fight, their threat level would be unfathomable.

“My weapon’s barely holding up,” said Loren. “The day one of those things comes at us armed is the day I throw in the towel.”

His sword had survived sorties with typical goblins before, but with their newfound, albeit rudimentary, combat skills, the new generation had taken to hitting it with their swords and shields. Loren wasn’t even fighting a mock-goblin, yet he saw thin, all-too-visible cracks spread along its length.

He could feel his sword’s fragility when he gripped the hilt. With each passing slash, Loren worried it would cry out and snap. He’d get no rest, though, as the stream of goblins showed no sign of thinning. They burst into the room one after another, and now even Loren had his share of minor wounds.

Finally, the bad news arrived.

“The big one’s here!”

Ritz pointed grimly toward a doorway shadowed by a conspicuously taller silhouette. Granted, only one mock-goblin stood before them, but unlike the prior versions, this one held a massive wooden club.

Loren rushed forward as soon as he saw its weapon, smashing into it with all of his momentum. Neither Ritz nor Chuck nor Nym could handle this monster, he knew that. It was his responsibility.

He did not have the element of surprise. As Loren's sword came down, the mock-goblin met it with a hammering blow from its club.

The air echoed with the clash of metal on wood, and Loren's slash was diverted. To his disconcertion, Loren found himself at a disadvantage in both weight and physical strength. As they shoved against each other, Loren and his sword were losing. He lurched backward as the club swiped through the air where his head had been, forcing him back even further.

The mock-goblin closed the distance and swung again; Loren just managed to draw his hefty blade back in time to block. He summoned all his power to press back against the wood.

"Bastard..."

No matter how hard he pushed, he could barely match his foe's enhanced strength. As they shoved, competing for the right to live, the mock-goblin's eyes narrowed ever so slightly.

"Did...did you just smile?" Loren didn't know if it could understand him. But the moment those stifled words escaped his lips, the mock-goblin's mouth joined its eyes. Its smile now was wider, deeper.

It was sneering at him.

The moment he realized that, Loren heard it—the snap within the depths of his mind.

"Don't underestimate me, dammit!"

If he couldn't compete with the brute strength of arms, the answer was simple. He needed to use more than *just* his arms.

Something within urged Loren forward like a red-hot stake hammered into his

brain. It drove him to launch a kick into the mock-goblin with all his might.

It faltered ever so slightly. Retreated a step. But the smile hadn't vanished from its face. As if to say it had no doubt this puny human couldn't hope to match its strength, that Loren was trying to put up a strong front. That it knew he was a weakling, struggling to the last. The mock-goblin knew that if they continued exchanging blows, it would undoubtedly come out the victor.

Then that smile—that sneer—stiffened.

Loren stood before it. He had crossed the distance between them at a speed that made clear he hadn't given a single thought to defending himself. His next blow was once again intercepted by the mock-goblin's club, but the impact felt different this time.

The mock-goblin was forced another step back—Loren charged again, even faster this time. His second blow, while quicker, was once again blocked. The third blow was stronger still. Unable to endure any more damage, the mock-goblin's club snapped in two.

In a panicked attempt to flee, the mock-goblin shoved through the hordes of goblins behind it. But Loren only continued to gain speed. His fourth slash, unleashed while running, made mincemeat of the lesser goblins who found themselves in its path before it struck the mock-goblin's hand. The force of Loren's blow severed hard skin and flesh, even bone, as the mock-goblin's arm erupted in black blood.

The mock-goblin cried out in pain, only to be pushed back even further by a body blow. Loren had entered a tackle as he exited his swing. The mock-goblin couldn't regain its footing; it could only watch as the greatsword swung once more.

This slash was the mirror image of the previous. It sunk deep into the mock-goblin's other forearm, then its torso. The blade made it all the way to the other side of the mock-goblin's body in the blink of an eye. It carried so much force that the mock-goblin's severed upper body spun up into the air as the rest of it crumpled, spouting blood.

None of this stopped Loren. Accelerating even faster with each step, his arms swung at such speed that the air around him roared. By this point, he was

beyond caring where he aimed, or if the edge of his blade even made contact with goblin flesh. The absurd mass of this man and his weapon spun at preposterous speeds, forming a mighty whirlwind.

Any and all who dared touch this wind was immediately severed, carved up, smashed, dismembered, flung about, and scattered, reduced to mere objects. Loren's fury was so great that Ritz and Chuck stopped fighting and hurriedly retreated to where Nym and Koltz were stationed. If they'd remained on the battlefield, there was no telling when they too would have been dragged into the storm, and who knew what would happen then.

"The hell is that...?" Chuck muttered in a daze. He had, for the most part, perfectly articulated his party's sentiments.

Loren had become an overwhelming cyclone of a one-sided massacre. Goblins that stood against him were turned to blackish-red chunks of meat, splattering the floor, the walls, even the ceiling. At this point, some goblins even attempted to flee, only to be prevented by the still oncoming stream of their own brethren. In the end, they were all consumed by the storm.



Soon, a few mock-goblins appeared in the doors. They blocked one or two of Loren's attacks each before succumbing to the fate of the other normal goblins.

"Hey, doesn't this ring a few bells?" said Chuck. "He moves like the wind, sweeping through all who stand before him. That rumored..."

"The Cleaving Gale?" said Ritz. "Couldn't be. Let's be real here. What would such a famous mercenary be doing as a copper-rank adventurer in the middle of nowhere?"

"Oh, come on! How many people could pull this off?!" Chuck practically screamed.

Not that anyone had the answer.

It was said that any mercenary with a moniker could single-handedly tip the scales of war. Among them, the swordsman known as the Cleaving Gale was said to rival those who stood at the very summit of martial skill. In a battle of pure sword technique—so long as magic wasn't involved—rumor had it he could outdo even the Infernal Edge and the Blade Fiend. Who in their right mind would believe that a warrior so often equated with the grim reaper would be an adventurer of the lowest rank?

Regardless of the truth, the silver-rank party was growing increasingly cornered, and no one denied that Loren alone might be able to overturn what had, until this moment, looked like impending doom.

"Don't you think it might work out at this rate?" Koltz cheerfully asked.

"Misplaced optimism will be the death of us," Nym shot him down.

"Then what? You want us to give up all hope?!"

"Wrong. Don't leave it all to him is what I mean. We are silver-rank adventurers. Where is your pride?"

"That's, well, that's true..." Chuck awkwardly scratched his head.

Nym pointed at the man who continued to fight, unfaltering, at a fearsome pace. The man who carved through every intruding goblin without pause. "That there spells trouble."

“Huh? What about it...?”

Neither Chuck nor Ritz could tell what she meant. Nym was only able to notice the danger thanks to the sounds she could pick up with her elven ears.

“His sword. It’s about to break.”

“What?!”

Loren too was well aware of this danger. He slew goblin after goblin in a frenzy in part because he knew he wouldn’t get another chance. He was already on borrowed time. The shiver in the hilt and the tinks in his ear all told him his blade was at the end of its life.

From time to time, whenever Loren’s emotions reached a fever pitch or he suffered a major injury, something inside him *snapped* and he found himself exhibiting powers beyond his usual capabilities. This he knew. It was not a strength he could summon on command, so it wasn’t the least bit convenient. But he had been saved by it more times than he could count.

However, he also knew that, if he survived, he would feel like hell soon after. He would be immobile, exhausted, and, to say the least, in a hell of a tight spot. Even so, he thanked his luck that he had somehow summoned the power now.

His body was one thing, though; it would recover. His sword was another matter. It would most definitely give out before he did. And while he could manage to fight with speed alone on his side, at least for a while, soon he would falter, and he would be left with nothing.

Loren slashed through the neck of another mock-goblin, severing flesh and bone all at once. He didn’t know how many he had killed by now.

The moment its head hit the floor, the sword let off a shrill sound. Cracks lanced across the middle and the top half broke off, shattered from within.

“Dammit!” Loren cursed. But the loss of half his blade didn’t suddenly mean he couldn’t fight. The sword had been too long to begin with. Even halved, he could carry on.

However, a decrease in mass meant a decrease in force. Perhaps the lightened load would increase the speed of his swing, but it would decrease the

damage dealt by every individual blow.

The broken edge soared out from within the winds of his violence, clashing into the wall.

“Damn, that’s not good! His weapon’s done for! How much longer?!” Ritz called out.

Lapis’s eyes shifted briefly when the blade hit the wall but swiftly returned to the task at hand.

“Hey, how about it? Hey?” Ritz repeated.

“You can rush me all you want. I’m going as fast as I can.”

“I get that, but at this rate, your partner’s going down!”

A shorter blade also reduced Loren’s range. That meant fewer goblins slain in a single attack, and this slowed Loren’s overall pace—he could no longer keep up with the goblin deluge. The only way to win—to survive—would be for Lapis to finish her work.

“I know that, believe me, I do! But I’ve already input the commands to shut down the facility and halt the goblins! It’s just the last one. I can’t make the termination code of this stupid control module work!” Her voice was louder, rougher. She was clearly irritated.

Ritz didn’t understand even half of what she said. “What?”

“In short, the machine I’m operating right now won’t stop properly! If I could stop it, the other two commands would instantly take effect! Then the goblins would stop in their tracks and the place would fall apart and we could all go home!”

“If you just have to get it to stop, can’t you break the thing itself?”

“Oh, why, I hadn’t thought of that! It’s only survived hundreds of years without maintenance, and it works good as new! But yes, it will stop if you break it, so have at it, why don’t you?!”

Lapis stepped back and Ritz slammed his sword into the device. However, his attack left not a single scratch. On the contrary, his sword snapped.

“That’s—it’s so hard!”

“It’s not the material, it’s the spell sequence coating the surface! It’s not going to break from your half-baked attacks! In fact, I’d say nothing short of a magic sword would do the trick!”

Their argument had reached Loren’s ears. He didn’t understand any of the finer details, but apparently, they had two options. Either they got Lapis more time or they destroyed the machine she’d been fiddling with. The machine, however, was protected by some spell that Ritz’s sword couldn’t pierce.

Once he’d thought that far through it, Loren had an idea. Whether or not it would work didn’t quite matter; he just had to do something. Otherwise, he would run out of strength, and then they’d really be screwed.

“Lapis! Get away from there!” he shouted.

Summoning the last of his great strength, Loren took an enormous swing to clear out the goblins around him. He didn’t have time to check if Lapis had followed his command. Instead, he stuffed a hand into his pocket and grabbed the item he wanted.

In most cases, items of this sort activated upon being imbued with a particular intent. If Loren wanted to be extra sure it knew what he wanted, he had to clarify his desires verbally as well. Thus, upon throwing it at the machine Lapis had been working at, he shouted at it, loud and clear:

“You better bloody work!”

The item flying through the air was a golden necklace with a dull glow. It burst with light at Loren’s command and unleashed the spell with which it had been enchanted.

“*Disjunction?!* ” Lapis had already taken a few steps away from the machine—but now that she realized what Loren was up to, she ran for dear life.

Upon collision, the necklace released all the mana it had stored from the time the goblin magician had used it. The burst of power obliterated whatever “spell sequence” had protected the device.

Loren followed this up by chucking the remnants of his sword. “Break

already!”

Hurtling with the power of Loren’s monstrous strength, the halved sword spun wildly before colliding head-on with the surface of the machine.

Its defenses dispelled, the machine was no more than base material. Loren’s brute strength could instantly decapitate even a mock-goblin, and that power allowed his broken weapon, now essentially a lump of heavy iron, to tear straight through it. The jagged end of the once-was blade carved a cavernous gash through the machine’s surface and sank deep into its innards.

“Th-that was close...” Lapis murmured.

The necklace hadn’t been given much time to store mana, so its effective radius was evidently quite a bit smaller than it had been, and Lapis had successfully escaped the range of its influence. Even so, one wrong step and she would have lost the use of her limbs again.

The way she looked at Loren nevertheless made it quite clear she was ready to complain all about it. He saw that, felt some odd flare of appreciation, then promptly ran out of strength and collapsed.

“Hey?! Mr. Loren?! Mr. Loren?! Are you okay?!”

Lapis rushed over to him in a panic while the other four watched, entranced. The tower of devices displaying all manner of letters and insignia slowly faded to dull black, inert. Simultaneously, the goblins who had rushed to expel the intruders fell to the floor one after another like marionettes whose strings had been cut.

Epilogue: Awakening to a Promise

“OH, YOU’RE AWAKE, Mr. Loren. Good for you.”

When Loren opened his eyes, there was Lapis, peering straight back at him. He felt a strange weight on his chest. After slapping his forehead a few times to clear his mind, he held his hand there.

At his back was a soft bed. A clean blanket lay over him. The weight on his chest evidently came from Lapis straddling him.

Loren lifted his hand from his brow and delivered a flick to her rather close forehead.

“That smarts!”

“Don’t sit on people,” he said as she lurched backward.



She teared up and rubbed her forehead, a dissatisfied look on her face as she gestured around the room. “There’s nowhere else to sit.”

Loren turned his head to take in their surroundings. To put it simply, this was a sickroom. Sterile and bleak, the only furnishings apart from the bed were a table and shelf. Lapis was right. For some reason, there really was no chair.

Sunlight and a breeze filtered through the window, and the curtain draped over it swayed gently.

“Is this a hospital?”

“That’s right. Do you want to hear what happened after you fell unconscious?”

Loren nodded without hesitation.

“Incidentally, what’s the last thing you remember?”

“I remember throwing my sword.” He’d seen it hit its target. As for whether that had actually done anything, he didn’t know. *Well, I’m not in the world beyond, and I’m not in the ruins, so I probably broke it at least.*

He still wanted the full story.

“Well then, it seems you really were both conscious and aware. People who let themselves run berserk are prone to memory lapses and other cognitive damage. I’m glad to hear your rampage was a benign one.”

“Benign? You mean there are good ones and bad ones?”

“Is that not obvious? More importantly, ah, after you lobbed your sword, was it?”

Lapis confirmed that the enchanted necklace and Loren’s half-a-sword had successfully destroyed the control module. With that, the orders Lapis had keyed into the system finally took effect. The goblin horde fell totally unconscious and the ruins themselves ceased all operations.

“But between you and me, those ruins can never be used again.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yes. I mean, the control module was completely destroyed. The necklace

also erased the spells that ran its interior circuitry. It's beyond repair now."

Lapis declared that a good thing, considering the modern era. The people of the ancient kingdom had lived in an entirely different sort of world. A facility that bred goblins for experimentation was far too much to handle for modern magic.

Even if some country had wanted to put the facility to military use, the orders imprinted in the goblins' heads didn't work beyond the confines of the ruins. At most, they might have produced an army of goblins and mock-goblins, then abandoned them somewhere to instigate chaos. But if that was the case, the facility was far better off as a true ruin, as far as Lapis saw it.

"Mr. Ritz and the others were pretty bitter about it, though."

"Well, we rendered their investigation useless. I don't blame them."

Their party had been at least half-joking, of course. Though they had ended up saying some hurtful things, in Lapis's opinion. The truth of the matter was that they bore no grudge toward Loren.

But why should I go out of my way to tell him that? she thought.

Certainly, Ritz's party had found enough information about the ruins to pin down its true purpose beyond a shadow of a doubt. However, as the ruins were dead, that information was all purely academic; it had no practical value.

Lapis also told Loren that they had found hardly any treasures or artifacts on their way out. This meant that Ritz's party had not received payment in accordance with their expectations. Between the money they'd spent preparing for the search and the costs of treating their injured members, they were now quite a bit in the red.

But as they say, "Where there's life, there's hope." Every member of Ritz's party held Loren in the utmost esteem.

Lapis said not a word on the matter, however. Loren didn't ask either; from his point of view, he wouldn't blame the adventurers for resenting him, as he had ruined any chance of properly completing their job. To be clear, Lapis never *said* anyone resented him, but neither did she say anything to correct his clear misunderstanding.

“I wouldn’t want you to get too attached,” Lapis murmured. If Loren happened to grow close to a party that not only boasted a rather high rank, but also demonstrated few genuine personality problems, well, that could prove to be quite the troublesome development for her.

For that reason, Lapis intended to let their dust settle a moderate distance away.

“Did you just say something?” Loren asked.

Her whisper, luckily, hadn’t reached his ears. Knowing careless words would be her downfall, Lapis powered on. “While the exploration itself was a failure, it’s not as if there were no results to speak of. They still made some findings. They’ll be paid once their efforts are validated, so they should come out all right in the end.”

“Still, I did wrong by them.”

Loren sounded truly sorry. Lapis concluded she shouldn’t pursue the matter further. She cleared her throat. “Moving on, the ruins are practically harmless now. A proper investigation team will be sent in a few days, but after they finish up, they’re apparently going to seal it up again. If you ask me, the whole facility is essentially rocks now, so they might as well just leave it be. But I suppose you can never be too sure.”

Once an official investigation was dispatched, they would most likely survey the surrounding area as well. Maybe, just maybe, the two women from Saerfé’s party would be found and rescued. Lapis was aware of the possibility, but she wasn’t the least bit invested either way. She found it a waste of time to think about people she most likely would never meet again.

“Who carried me here?” Loren asked abruptly. “Where am I, anyway?”

“I carried you, naturally. How could I leave that to anyone else? And we are in a hospital in Kaffa. Those adventurers offered to help, don’t get me wrong, but they had injuries of their own to take care of.”

They had all worked together by chance, but in the end, they were separate parties. It was just common sense for an adventurer to tend to their own party members first. And after all, Chuck had been injured, so of course Ritz had

prioritized him.

This was the story Lapis told, at least. In truth, Chuck had been able to walk on his own well enough, and there had been no need to carry him. Ritz had offered to transport Loren, but Lapis had politely declined, carried Loren to the village of Ain herself, and hitched a cart back to Kaffa from there.

“Sorry to trouble you.”

“Oh no, it’s no trouble at all. They’re not the only ones who lost out. Our goblin hunt was also deemed a failure. It’s understandable, really. Three of our members didn’t return, we emphatically did not wipe out the nest, and we have no evidence of the goblins we did kill.”

The bag of goblin ears had gone missing in the midst of the chaos. *I must have swung around too violently and dropped it*, thought Loren. With how fiercely he fought, he hadn’t even considered the sack hanging from his belt. And so long as it was lost, the adventurers’ guild couldn’t pay their reward.

That’s on me, Loren sighed. “Looks like I need to apologize to you again, Lapis.”

Loren really had lost the sack, but if she felt like it, Lapis could have easily collected as many goblin ears as she wanted from the immobile bodies littering the ruins. Even if she limited her harvest to the ones Loren defeated in that control room, that would still have been more than enough to equal their expected payday.

But she hadn’t. Though the ruins were inactive, the danger wasn’t necessarily gone, or so Ritz’s party had seemed to believe, and they had proposed a swift retreat. More importantly, those missing goblin ears had just been in the way of Lapis achieving her objective.

“Don’t let it bother you,” she said. “Oh, I paid the wagon fee from your wallet, but you didn’t have enough for the treatment and hospitalization.”

Loren abruptly lost all motivation to leave the bed. He slumped down. He could feel the power draining out of his body.

He’d only ever accepted the first quest on account of his profoundly empty pockets. Yet not only had he dropped what would have earned his reward, his

debts had increased. Even the wagon fee hadn't originally been his. It was, essentially, still Lapis's money.

He cautiously peeked at her face.

"I'll pay, don't worry," she said, having accurately inferred the meaning in his eyes.

"How long have I been out?"

"About three days. Travel took one day, so if you want a breakdown, that's one night and two days of hospitalization on top of treatment. That puts you at about five silver."

He sighed. This was a sum he couldn't possibly pay quickly, but Lapis was all smiles as she closed in on his face again and whispered. "Don't worry your pretty little head over it. Think of it as a loan, and I won't even be taking interest."

"I don't know when I'll be able to pay you back."

"I won't rush you. I'll accept installments too."

What Lapis didn't say was that she was the only person of either party who had come out of the ruins making a profit. As she had rummaged through the residential area searching for the manual, she had secretly stuffed anything valuable into her pockets, just as she had promised to do. Her sleight of hand had been so masterful even Chuck the thief hadn't noticed.

Thus, Lapis alone had made off with treasure. Most of the things she'd found were accessories enchanted with some magic. From that, she deduced the manager had been a woman. She also suspected the *Disjunction* necklace had come from those rooms. The rooms hadn't been locked, and therefore it had only ever been a matter of time before a particularly shrewd goblin made it to them. The item had perhaps been randomly passed around between the monsters until it fell into the hands of a goblin who escaped and learned how to use it upon evolving into a magician.

She had no means to test the validity of her theories now that the facility was destroyed, alas.

“Aren’t you being a bit generous?” Loren asked.

“In exchange, I’d like you to travel with me for a while,” Lapis declared.

She had finally reached the main subject. Her goal wasn’t profit or knowledge: it was Loren himself. A skilled and trustworthy individual who hadn’t flinched, glowered, or been otherwise objectionable upon learning that she was one of those vile demons. That in itself made him more valuable than most people.

In order to experience the world, Lapis had snuck into it as a priest. But although she was a demon with superior abilities, there was a limit to what she could do alone. Traveling with a swordsman would mean that between them, they covered all the basic roles of an adventuring party. If she were to offer their services to other parties, it would save a lot of trouble if they came as a set.

The point was, moving around alone as a female priest was more troublesome than she had expected. All sorts of people tried to reel her into their spheres with ulterior motives, and when she had finally found a halfway decent party, they hadn’t let her leave as she pleased.

“I don’t think it’s a bad offer,” she said. “What do you say?”

It did feel a bit, well, dubious to bind him with debt. But Lapis considered Loren such a valuable opportunity she was willing to put aside her doubts. Even when she tried thinking about it from Loren’s perspective, she saw quite a few advantages for him in traveling with a priest.

Yes, a priest who could treat even major injuries in an instant—they would be rather indispensable to a swordsman, wouldn’t they?

“Um, how about it?” she timidly asked again. For Loren gave no answer. She was beginning to grow anxious, and she wondered if she had made him angry.

His face weary, Loren looked beyond Lapis to the ceiling, then opened his mouth. “Doesn’t sound like I’ve got much of a choice.”

“Can I take that as a yes?”

“Yes. I promise. But only until I pay off my debt.”

“That works out just fine. It’s a pleasure doing business with you again, Mr.

Loren.”

Lapis’s face lit up like a lantern. Gazing up at her smile, Loren wished she’d get off of him before he began to feel weird about it. How exactly would he pay her back, anyway?

Of course, Loren had no idea that underneath her beaming smile, the girl was considering all sorts ways in which to increase his debt in order to keep him around as long as possible.

And like that, a single broke mercenary began to walk a new path as an adventurer.

Bonus Story:

From the Notes of a Certain Priest

HELLO, I'M LAPIS. Just your average, everyday demon.

You might say that introducing myself as a demon contradicts my claim to be average, and in fact a lot of people (humans, that is) think so. But get a large-enough group of any people together, and it makes sense that most of them would be average, no?

Putting all that philosophizing aside, you may be wondering why a normal, healthy little demon girl is writing this meaningless spiel. Well, it all started one morning when my parents suddenly kicked me out of the house, saying I needed to go see the wider world.

My world until that moment had been in a basin surrounded by high mountains. However, they wanted me to see the world beyond it—that of humans and demihumans. Demons were evidently just a little too strong to live among the other races, however, so I would have to learn skills to conceal my abilities.

Now that was a trick I never quite figured out. Thus, I was certain I'd never be able to live among the humans. My parents, on the other hand, soon resorted to somewhat drastic measures to resolve the issue.

Get this. They stole their daughter's limbs and eyes while she was asleep and replaced them with artificial prosthetics. I know it sounds crazy, and I think my parents are even crazier for hiding those body parts all over the world and telling their poor daughter to go look for them.

On a side note, once I finish my search, I have every intention of interrogating them on the details of their grand heist. I mean, my legs were detached at quite a precarious place. If that was Father's handiwork, it would mean not only did he sneak into his sleeping daughter's room, he had to tamper with the base of her thigh! I don't believe this is a matter I can let slide without a few well-placed punches.

That aside, there I found myself, traveling the world because I had been kicked out. I didn't have any particularly strong feelings on the matter. Demons are famous for looking young regardless of whatever ridiculous age they attain, but I was just as eighteen as I appeared to be. I was hopeful that gaining experience while young would actually work in my favor, down the road.

Honestly, I would have liked it if my parents had been a bit more, hm, tactful in their means, but the dismemberment didn't particularly hurt or feel nauseating or anything of the sort. So, well, I figured that perhaps I could live with it.

It wasn't difficult to blend in with the humans. My purple eyes—a demon's distinguishing trait—had been replaced with prosthetics as well, so I didn't need to conceal them. My presence had also weakened considerably with the loss of my limbs, and as long as I didn't get too serious, I felt practically human to be around.

My only other worry was how I would earn my keep. If I sold the items I'd brought from home, I would surely have had enough to play around for a long time. Of course, that would have prevented me from fulfilling my parents' command to go out and properly see the world. I felt like I *had* to work, at least to a certain degree. As one might expect, I had a certain knack for all sorts of things. It wasn't hard to find my calling.

Among humans, it's generally said that demons have no faith. This is mistaken. It's more accurate to say that there are hardly any gods worthy of our devotion, and the right gods actually have a number of pious demonic adherents.

I—as you might imagine—was one of them. I offered my belief to the god of knowledge, who had grown relatively popular among my kin. That eventually led me to the priesthood, a development that would ultimately get me through my troubles.

If you're wondering how I got my certifications in the human world, it's pretty simple. I banged on the church door until they let me in, then went through all the proper procedures and passed all the tests. I have nothing to feel guilty about. I wasn't the best at pretending to be human, but with a bit of time, I

picked up all the tools I needed to manage. Status goes a long way in all worlds, you see.

I did consider entering service at some church like any other priest, but that would essentially have tied me down to the spot, and that would have gone against my parents' instructions. In which case, the peripatetic, multifaceted lifestyle of an adventurer sounded like the right one for me. This was a path that only eccentrics chose, and I was sure a priest who could use healing blessings would be in high demand.

Becoming an adventurer was far easier than becoming a priest. I went up to the guild—a sort of mutual aid organization—gave them my name, and that was it. I was no longer a priest; I was an *adventuring* priest.

That was where I ran into my next problem. An adventurer couldn't work alone. More accurately, adventurers didn't work alone, but that was just semantics. Sure, I could most likely have carried out any of the quests for copper-rank adventurers all by my lonesome. Unfortunately, if a priest thought to have no combat abilities continued completing job after job on her own, she would without a doubt draw suspicion.

I didn't think I'd be suddenly outed as a demon, but I didn't want any unnecessary attention. With that in mind, I searched out a party—inexperienced and incapable. If they were too competent, I would have to carry out all sorts of troublesome jobs, and I wasn't *that* keen on working. I wanted a position with a group that just took a moderate number of jobs, moved from town to town, and let me get a bit of experience along the way. That was all I needed.

In hindsight, I can only say I was naïve. I was still eighteen at the time, too young to be ever prudent. I don't blame myself, but with that mindset, the party I joined—rather, they invited me and I accepted—was one I would sum up with two words: the worst.

A swordsman and thief girl right out of the sticks. A magician who had proven herself relatively skilled at her academy. I thought the party fulfilled my criteria well enough, but their conduct beggared belief. They would thoughtlessly cross swords with foes, enter enemy territory without prior investigation, waste

magic where it wasn't necessary... Just exactly the sort of party that would make you want to scream, "How thoughtless can you be?!"

Time and time again, I softly wrapped this message in silk and conveyed it as gently as I could. What do you think they said? "We'll be fine as long as we have a swordsman." "We can manage if we're together." "We'll be fine; I believe in you."

All sentiment, no meat.

If that wasn't bad enough, the members apart from myself seemed to be so terribly, *terribly* close. Whether it be an inn in town, or a tent on the way, they put their intimacy on full display. The walls shook day after day.

Town, yes, maybe there I could understand. But if they insisted on conducting themselves in such a way when we were out camping, how were we supposed to rotate the watch? Luckily, my abilities as a demon gave me stamina far exceeding human understanding. One or two sleepless nights wasn't enough to deter me, but my mental fatigue grew and grew, and weakened as I was, I frequently found myself fearing these fine folks, who had cornered a demon into accepting such dreadful working conditions.

I felt like I was starting to understand why humans were the world's most populous creature, and why they had the widest biosphere. The way things were going, I began betting on whether the anxiety or the sleep deprivation would take me out first.

That was when I met him.

If I had to describe the impression I got when we first met, I would say he was like a lump of steel. His well-trained body was outfitted with equipment it took only a glance to see he was utterly accustomed to wearing. Though he said he was a former mercenary, I had always pictured such folks to be a bit rowdier. And while his words were a bit rough around the edges, he gave off the impression of someone who had received at least some form of education. Even the way he walked hinted at the hidden depths of his skills.

With all that said, he had lived his entire life as a mercenary, and his knowledge was partial in a number of regards. He certainly had no experience as an adventurer. Nevertheless, I got the feeling he was a tad too competent for

my liking.

But he didn't make a stink upon brushing up against our party's debauchery, and the humility with which he quietly accepted a one-man night watch was quite favorable. He was kind enough to cheerfully accept my conversation that night, where he demonstrated he was even a bit amusing. I had nothing to criticize.

I knew then we couldn't let him go. We needed him in our party whether he liked it or not.

That was where things took a turn. In the middle of our job, my original party members were tragically wiped out by goblins, and I myself was incapacitated by an unanticipated attack. To think, the demon who went out to see the world would end up a goblin pincushion. This was no laughing matter, and I had about given up.

Yet he saved my life.

They say that love often blooms when people are placed together in dire circumstances. They also say those relationships don't last long. To tell you the truth, I wasn't thinking anything of the sort at the time. I just *knew* I would never find anyone better to work alongside...and I carelessly revealed my identity.

Thinking back on it now, if I take into consideration just how despised demons are, there was absolutely no reason for me to let the cat out of the bag. However, fortunately, while he was a little surprised, he showed me no antipathy, and he even continued to help me. Because of him, I avoided a dreadful final scene.

What we had expected to be a simple goblin hunt ultimately led us back to ruins of the ancient kingdom. I was subsequently wrapped up in a dreadful situation that included a massive goblin stampede, which I found a bit extreme for my tastes. But once it was all over, it was the sort of thing I could look back on and think, "Meh, it was one of those days."

Putting all that aside, by that point, I couldn't possibly let Mr. Loren get away. I'll be the first to admit it I was somewhat manipulative, not to mention ungrateful to someone who had protected my life and virtue, but I ultimately

succeeded in getting a promise that we would travel together.

I have no intentions of making Mr. Loren regret that decision. My only concern is whether what I can grant him will be equal to what I will surely gain through this exchange. You see, I'm sure that working with him will allow me to experience even more than my parents had hoped.

Yes, I pray Mr. Loren comes out the other end of this thinking that our contract was no mistake. But that will be a work in progress, and one that requires some proper thought on my part.

Let's end my ramblings there for now.

Why am I even writing this? I don't plan on showing it to anyone. Maybe I can let my mother have a read-through when I return home.

On second thought, perhaps I might let Mr. Loren have a glimpse someday... No, perhaps... Maybe, just maybe I'm writing this incoherent drivel in the hopes that one day I can look back on it with him and laugh at how something like this or that happened to us, once upon a time.

I'd better put down my pen before I write anything that will leave me writhing in agony on my reread. Such delusions are best kept to myself, and to my dreams.

Afterword

TO ALL THOSE NEW to my work, it's a pleasure to meet you. And a pleasure to meet those who aren't as well. The name's MINE, an oddball amateur writer who submits his work, day after day, to a site called *Let's Be Novelists*. I just so happened to have a bit of luck this time around, which led to the official novelization and publication of *The Strange Adventures of a Broke Mercenary* through Hobby Japan.

While I say that, Hobby Japan has already published another work of mine —*New Life+: Young Again in Another World*. Perhaps some of you have heard about it. If you haven't, I couldn't be happier if you took this opportunity to test the waters with that one too.

Back to *Broke Mercenary*: What did you think about it? There's no reincarnation involved. It's a story about a normal (?) mercenary setting foot into a typical fantasy world of adventurers, or at least that was my intention when I started writing it.

While skilled, our protagonist has little knowledge of what it means to be an adventurer. How will he handle his new role? How will he interact with the strange folks who come to surround him, and where will he ultimately end up? I ask that you see it through together with me. And if you find it at least a little bit interesting, that means it was worth it for me to write.

There are some people out there who for some reason read the afterword before reading the story. To those people, I suggest you turn around and read the story before continuing. I don't plan to spoil anything, but the afterword is where I plan to offer my grievances and gratitude in regard to the book, so I assure you that reading beyond here will be completely meaningless to you. Though that's really up to you.

Personally speaking, time really has flown since I apologetically took my undeserved seat at the table of published authors. In fact, by the time this book comes out, it will have been my third year of writing. I've come so far, in fact, it's finally time for my second book to make its way into the wide world.

I'll admit, a part of me wants to keep up this momentum. But I get the feeling a certain author once said, "It all comes down to luck, fate, and timing." I pray from the bottom of my heart that proper guidance will lead us to meet again in the next volume.

I wouldn't quite call this a side note, but if this book is published without trouble, then the latest volume of *New Life+: Young Again in Another World* should come out on the same day. I'm sure I'll be offering my earnest gratitude for your patronage at the end of that book as well.

If I somehow didn't, don't think I meant it. Just laugh at this idiot writer for forgetting something so important. This author forgets things a lot, you know. So many times while writing, I suddenly realize there's something I have to say, yet I somehow write on without saying it...

This is the last part, don't worry.

To Hobby Japan's editing department, to the proofreaders, to the designers, and to everyone in the industry. To the editor, who read my rough draft, and to peroshi, who depicted Mr. Loren so perfectly it took me by shock. To my editor K-sama, who makes time to talk over the phone with me every so often. You all have my sincerest gratitude.

And my thanks to you, dear reader, as well.

I hope for your continued patronage, and I pray that we will meet again in my next book. And with that, I'll bring it to a close.

—**MINE**



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